

## DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

### Can cultures really change?

### The impact of Specialist Sports College status on an English High School

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# **Can Cultures Really Change? The Impact of Specialist Sports College Status on an English High School**

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*A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the University's requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy*

**2008**

***Coventry University in collaboration with the University of Worcester***

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## **Abstract**

This research explores the development of a Specialist Sports College within a framework of educational justice. It asks whether the development of the Specialist School can really mean equality of opportunity for all children, when some schools will, as a result, receive considerably more funding than others. It also considers the contentious policy location of the Specialist Sports College, found somewhere between ideologies of health and fitness for all and the development of elite sportsmen and women of the future. By investigating the transformation of one school into a Specialist College using a Case Study approach, this research explores the concept of transforming a school's culture, and questions the Government's expectations within this concept arena. What are the micro, lived effects of the macro policy of the Specialist School? By exploring the key themes that emerged through the data I conclude that transforming cultures is a far more complicated task than the Government perceive and also that the introduction of a single subject specialism may, in reality, lead to more division than unity. I also question whether PE can ever be a subject area that truly offers the possibility of success for all.

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# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **Introduction**

### ***Overview***

In this chapter I set out the parameters for my research. I explain what I perceive to be the 'problem' with Specialist Schools and the questions that I will attempt to answer. I make clear my theoretical approach and the research tools that I use to tackle the issue. Finally, I present the structure of the thesis and choices made as regards content.

### **1.1 Contextualizing the Study**

#### ***The Emerging Policy of the Specialist School***

A number of questions have arisen concerning the emergence of the Specialist School, many of which were explored by the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee (HCESC) in 2003. These queries primarily focused on the inequalities that were being forged between schools by the awarding of specialist status and the possibility that the schools with the greatest needs were being overlooked in terms of funding. But the issue that preoccupied my thoughts was 'how does the child feel who is very poor in a particular subject area, when their school glorifies the importance of that area of knowledge?' This, I felt, would be particularly pertinent in the arena of the SSC, as physical inadequacies are more tricky to disguise. My research took the view that the all-encompassing, subject-specific culture created by an adopted specialism would be potentially threatening to a child's self concept if they were not adept in that area. What actually transpired in the early days of my fieldwork was that the school's sports specialism had no notable effect on the culture of the school. Because of this my initial questions, outlined in my methodology,

became somewhat redundant. Instead I redirected my research to exploring ways in which the specialism had affected the micro-community of the school and in investigating the still relevant question of how the dichotomy between physical activity for enjoyment and 'serious' competitive sports was being broached by the school<sup>1</sup>.

As the focus of my research is a Specialist Sports College (SSC)<sup>2</sup>, it is difficult to explore this phenomenon without first following the emerging policy of the Specialist School. This opening section introduces the macro-level policy development of which my study school is a result.

In 1994, pilot Specialist Technology Colleges first introduced the concept of secondary schools receiving funding from the private sector. The reason that business was content to invest into education was that they expected a more thoroughly trained and capable workforce in return. The pilots were a success and the concept of the Specialist School snowballed. In January 2008, 88% of secondary schools in England had attained specialist status, and 26% of local authorities were 100% specialist ([www.dfes.gov.uk](http://www.dfes.gov.uk), accessed 1/03/08). But the specialisms no longer pertain specifically to industry. We now have varied specialisms, ranging from business, to languages, to sport. As the transformation of our secondary schooling continues, my concern is that we no longer cater for *all* children. By focusing on one subject we narrow down the opportunities for children to experiment widely in order to find their 'niche'. And by glorifying success in one area, it is possible that we could destroy the confidence of those who have little or no skill in that arena.

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<sup>1</sup> For a definition of PE and school sports please see page 14.

<sup>2</sup> Though referred to in Government literature as the development of Specialist Schools, most schools, having completed their designation, thereafter refer to themselves as a college. Because of this the terms will be used interchangeably.



In 2001 the Labour Government announced their aim to re-invent 1,500 secondary schools as Specialist Schools by the year 2005 (DfES, 2001). In September 2003 there were already 1,454 Specialist Schools in operation, so the target was raised to 2,000 Specialist Schools by 2006 (DfES, 2002b, p.2). In 2008, a total of 2,886 schools have achieved specialist status (Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, Department for Children, Schools and Families, [www.dcsf.gov.uk](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk), accessed 06/06/08).

The Specialist Technology Colleges initiative has escalated since a small number of pilot schools first appeared in 1994. Over the past fourteen years, there has been a significant contribution to education funds by benefactors in the private sector, and the Government has seen the desired rise in examination statistics. Early results suggested a considerable increase in GCSE grades for Specialist Schools. *Schools Achieving Success* stated that:

The 391 Specialist Schools operating in the summer of 2000 (excluding selective schools) averaged 53% of their pupils attaining 5 GCSEs at grades A\*-C, compared to 43% in other non-selective schools in England...  
(DfES, 2001, p.40)

It would appear that the achievement divide between Specialist and Non-Specialist Schools had taken place with some rapidity; as just a few months before we were told of this **10%** improvement in results, the Government Green Paper *Schools Building on Success* had suggested an overall percentage increase in examination grades of **6.1%** (DfEE, 2001, p.14). The Government was eager to glorify the success of their latest educational venture, but later results proved to be more in line with the more modest findings of the Green Paper.

In response to early Government claims Yeomans, Higham and Sharp (2000) performed their own research into specialist colleges and were a little

more reticent about the results. They found that the apparent improvement in Specialist Schools overall “masked considerable variations between the schools” and that although “In eight, the percentage of pupils achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A\*-C had increased since they became Specialist Schools... in four it had declined” (p.2). In due course the concept of using GCSE grades as an indication of success was questioned, due to its failure to take into account many determining factors. Jesson and Taylor’s investigation, *Value Added and the Benefits of Specialism* (2002) attempted a fairer comparison of effect by looking at value added scores, but this, too, was criticized for its narrowness (HCSE, 2003,p.31).

In 2007 the BBC and the Education Guardian (Lipsett, 2007) both commented that specialist status did very little, if anything at all, to improve the performance of schools ([www.news.bbc.co.uk](http://www.news.bbc.co.uk), accessed 07/01/08 and [www.educationguardian.co.uk](http://www.educationguardian.co.uk), accessed 07/01/08 ). That there is *some* improvement in examination results is indisputable, but over recent years the focus has shifted from *whether* there is any improvement in results for Specialist Schools and towards the more important question of *why*?

Although we are on the verge of all secondary schools in England taking on a subject specialism, it is still unclear whether the improvement that has been seen in grades is due to the schools’ attainment of vital funding, or whether Specialist Status really does have *added benefits*. In 2003 the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee made this comment.

Schools which have achieved Specialist School status can be exciting places with high levels of pupil attainment. The question we ask is whether this is due to the advantages that extra funding brings, or the management process that schools have to undertake, or something inherent in being a Specialist School. We urge the Government to engage in a more rigorous evaluation of the current programme than has so far been attempted. (HCESC, 2003, p.4)

Rigorous evaluations by the Government are yet to appear, instead they have stayed within the safer realm of examination results equating success. Recent results indicate that achievement within Specialist Schools is extremely varied, (Jesson and Crossley, 2007). Lipsett (2007), went so far as to suggest that the only *significant* difference between Specialist Schools and non-specialist comprehensives was that SSCs showed “slightly lower GCSE results than other schools on average” ([www.educationguardian.co.uk](http://www.educationguardian.co.uk), accessed 07/01/08).

The inequities within the present education revolution are manifold, the most pertinent being the competition for funding between schools rather than an equal sharing of resources, as it would appear that it is inevitably the under-achieving schools that miss out on the additional funding that they need. In the early stages of the Specialist School development there were times when funding for applications in any one geographical area was limited, so that it was a race to see which school could complete a successful application first. Schools in certain LEAs were warned that they need not apply for the time being and the DfEE apologised for this inconvenience (DfEE, 2000, *pre-introduction modifications to criteria*).

Because of the ‘rationing’ of subject specialisms to different areas, some schools gave in to the temptation to apply for whichever subject specialism was most likely to gain them funding, rather than for their subject strength. In the West, Noden, Kleinman and Whitehead Research Brief for the DfEE (2000) it was reported that over half of the head teachers questioned by LSE confessed that their school’s ‘specialist subject’ was not actually their strongest teaching area. Half also admitted that their main reason for applying for Specialist Status

was not due to any desire to develop a 'specialism', but because of the additional funding that it would bring (West *et al*, 2000, p.2).

In addition to competition between schools to attain funding, researchers have also found resentment *within* schools towards the departments in receipt of the lion's share of available capital. Houlihan (1999) discovered this in his study of four SSCs. He reports, concerning the impact of specialist status at one of the schools:

...there were signs initially of a sense of grievance from other departments at the flow of additional resources to physical education. As a result there is some pressure for an internal reallocation of resources to placate the dissident staff.  
(Houlihan, 1999, p.13)

Another issue that has been debated is parental choice of schools. Traditionally the majority of children have claimed a place in the secondary school closest to their homes, but this may need to change as children travel across cities to the schools that best cater to their 'skills'. Or it may be the case that gifted linguists find themselves in Specialist Science Colleges because of their geographical proximity. Transport then becomes an important issue, and yet another potential barrier for the already disadvantaged. Hackett (2001) highlights the possibility that "Girls will end up in arts colleges and the engineering and maths colleges will fill with boys" in the Sunday Times<sup>3</sup>. These and other issues, including parental mobility and the fallacy of choice, will be discussed in the next chapter.

Perhaps the most poignant concern, from a social justice perspective, is what will happen to 'the rest.' If Specialist Status is of such benefit to pupils, then the Government cannot be justified in preventing a large number of

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<sup>3</sup> Houlihan and Wong (2005) found that there was an under-representation of girl only schools within SSCs, relative to all secondary schools (p.5).

children from experiencing it. How will struggling schools be supported as they suffer the further indignity of their already more successful partner schools being gifted with additional funding through Specialist Status? The HCESC (2003) pointed out that just as important as the improvements that were being seen in Specialist Schools, were the detrimental effects that they were having on their non-specialist neighbours. They questioned whether perhaps one was achieving at the expense of another.

By 2001 accusations of inequality creeping back into our educational system were heard frequently enough for the education minister Estelle Morris to address them directly in The Government White Paper *Schools Achieving Success* (2001). Whilst referring to the introduction of the Specialist Schools Programme, she said, “There are those who have said that Specialist Schools will create a two tier system. They won’t” (DfES, 2001, p40). She did not make it clear how segregation would be prevented, and since then the gulf between examination results in Specialist and Non-Specialist Schools has continued to widen.

The growth of the Specialist Schools System is in the process of transforming secondary schooling as we have known it in recent years in England. Into the strong curricular prescriptivism, which remained from the nineteen-eighties and early ‘nineties, words like ‘diversity’, ‘choice’ and ‘individuality’ are now becoming acceptable again. In the Government Green Paper *Schools Building on Success*, the DfEE (2001) promoted “greater diversity of provision; greater equality of outcome” (p.63). But the concern of many is that with the changes that are taking place, equality *will* be sacrificed. It appears that rather than continuing to strive towards the elusive goal of a good

quality education for all, the Department for Education and Skills has instead opted for excellence in certain subjects in certain geographical areas.

The DfES (2001) justified the shift in emphasis by disclaiming that: “Far from concentrating success in a few schools, diversity is about motivating individual schools, spreading excellence, sharing success and working collaboratively” (p.38). The DfES claim that the ideal of schools *sharing* their skills and subject development is at the very heart of their policy development. Specialist Schools are required to disseminate their best practice to the schools within their ‘family of schools’. This may work well within their ‘pyramid’, which puts them at the head of a group of feeder schools, but not so successfully with fellow secondary or high schools. In Houlihan and Wong’s 2004 report on SSCs, they found that there was a continuing reluctance for the colleges to work with fellow secondary schools, in favour of working with primary schools (2005, p.7). Collaboration is difficult between schools in competition for funding, as Aiston *et al* (2002) discovered.

The many difficulties that have surfaced through current educational debate are obvious, and all worth researching thoroughly. My research’s location, within the realm of the SSC, brings with it still further complications. Below I set out my research agenda.

## **1.2 Aims and Research Questions**

Tomlinson (2003) commented that New Labour’s policies were “At best contradictory, and at worst have sharpened divisions and insecurities” (p.203). And the concept of the Specialist Sports College has certainly caused some confusion. SSCs have a unique ‘problem’ not experienced by the other Specialist Schools, in what Penney and Houlihan (2001) refer to as their ‘dual

policy location' (p.1). The Department of Education and Employment's (1997) justification for the funding of a 'non-academic' subject area was that:

Sports colleges raise the standard of physical education and community sport, and promote sporting prowess in pupils of all abilities, helping them benefit from the enhanced self-esteem, interpersonal and problem-solving skills which sports foster. (p.3).

So the development of skills, and the commitment, resilience and co-operation that comes from playing team-sports in school, will filter through to become a positive working ethos. But, as Parry (1988) asks, "who would claim the McEnroes and the Bests to be among the moral giants of our time?" (p.109). And, of course, the development of self-esteem depends, very much, on the manner in which physical education is approached, as it can also be a crushing experience, as I discuss later (p.70).

Conceptions of what comprises school 'sport', or PE, or the promotion of a healthy lifestyle in young people are extremely varied. Whilst acknowledging official definitions, I also had to consider phrases that would coincide with the perceptions of the students. The following definitions were used with the students and their validity was legitimised through student responses. Throughout this thesis *PE* refers to the curriculum subject, undertaken either mandatorily or optionally. The European Sports Charter (2001) most aptly describes *sport* as:

...all forms of physical activity, which, through casual or organised participation, aim at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, formal social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels.  
([www.sportsdevelopment.info](http://www.sportsdevelopment.info), 11/05/09)

*Physical activity* refers to any "bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that results in energy expenditure" (Caspersen, Powell and Christensen, 1985, p.126). This does not need to be a social activity and does not necessarily relate to competition.

The agendas of 'serious sport' and fun physical activity are extremely diverse, so one must question the approach that SSCs will be taking in attempting to encompass them. The Mission Statement for SSCs states:

Sports Colleges will raise standards of achievement in physical education and sports for all their students across the ability range. They will be regional focal points for excellence in PE and community sport, extending links between families of schools, sports bodies and communities, sharing resources and spreading good practice, helping to provide a structure through which young people can progress to careers in sport and PE. Sports Colleges will increase participation in physical education and sport for pre and post 16 year olds and develop the potential of talented performers. (DfEE, 2000, p.2)

There are dual requirements here; increasing *participation* in PE and sport is one of the SSCs' aims, but it also has the aim to 'develop the potential of talented performers' (DfEE 2000, p.2). Already for someone attempting to implement this mission statement it is more than a little confusing; should they be promoting sport as fun for all or something to be taken seriously whilst focusing on a talented few? In addition, as Penney and Houlihan (2001b) point out, it is very difficult to take any innovations within the PE and Games curriculum in isolation as they are watched closely by the National Governing Bodies and other sporting associations. For the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, SSCs are not just educational establishments, but potential venues for the production of the Nation's future sportswomen and men. Even though research informs us that by the time that children reach 13 their founding in sports should already be established<sup>4</sup>, in *A Sporting Future for All*, SSCs were specifically mentioned within the new elite sports development infrastructure in the UK (DCMS, 2000, p.15).

Immediately tensions become apparent, and it is precisely these conflicts that are the focus of my research. Physical activity and team sports are two very



different agendas, as are the aims to “increase participation” and “develop the potential of talented performers” (DfEE, 2000, p.2). The dichotomy between the two is clearly seen in table 1 below, based on competing agendas, as suggested by Murdoch (1990).

Table 1. Competing agendas for PE and Sport in SSC (adapted from Murdoch, 1990)

<b>PHYSICAL EDUCATION</b>	<b>SPORT</b>
Education	Recreation
Controlled by DES	Controlled by DoE
'New' physical education	Sporting Competition
Teachers	Coaches
Process	Product
LEARNING	PERFORMANCE
Child-centred development of the self	Sports-centred development of the sport
Participation and quality for all	Excellence for some
Compulsory	Voluntary
Ordinariness	Glamour

In this table Murdoch shows how every element of Physical Education and Sport entails vastly different approaches. Is the aim of a SSC to promote an improved understanding of the benefits of exercise and to encourage mass participation, or is it to nurture elite performance? Or is it actually possible for both agendas to co-exist? On the one hand we have the suggestion of enjoyment and the lifelong formation of good habits contributing towards a healthier lifestyle, on the other we have serious competition and the development of the skills of an exclusive few. So, whilst governing sports bodies encroach on the agendas of Sports Colleges by looking to them for their next batch of performers, the Department of Education and Skills seems unclear just what *its* expectations of the colleges are. It must be extremely problematic for a

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<sup>4</sup> Kirk (2005) states that by the age of 13-15 children have already moved from the sampling stage to the second specialising phase in sport, moving from “fun and enjoyment in itself to competitive success and enjoyment of winning”. (p.241)

SSC to untangle the many conflicting requirements and formulate a clear agenda.

In terms of the development of the SSC I envisaged many foreshadowed problems:

- If the school chose increased participation in physical activity by all as its main priority, then would there be comeback if it did not get sporting 'results'?
- If a SSC does not produce successful competitive teams, would it be seen to be 'failing'?
- If the choice of the school is to promote sporting excellence, then what effect would that have on the children who will never even be good, and are a lifetime away from excellence at sports?
- Is it possible for inclusion to function alongside competitive elitism?

The two concepts, of inclusion and the development of talented performers, do not appear to sit comfortably side by side. The term 'inclusion' is used in many and changing ways, in the PE curriculum guidelines it refers to:

...boys and girls, pupils with special educational needs, pupils with disabilities, pupils from all social and cultural backgrounds, pupils from different ethnic groups including travellers, refugees and asylum seekers and those from diverse linguistic backgrounds. (DfEE, 1999, p.29)

In the Study School's application for SSC status inclusion refers to only one thing: providing for those with special educational needs, particularly in the form of physical disability. I prefer Slee's (2001) definition that states, "... inclusive education is not about special educational needs, it is about all students" (p.116). By 'inclusion' I refer to providing for the needs of the most to the least talented, able-bodied children in Physical Education<sup>5</sup>. Like Booth (2000) I wish to investigate inclusion in its oppositional role, when placed

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<sup>5</sup> Numerous pieces of research have been completed over recent years looking at the integration of Special Needs children into main stream classrooms. That is not a focus for this study, though observations may be made concerning children with disabilities during the Case Study.

against the results-driven nature of the English educational system. Booth (2000) states:

I do not see educational inclusion as concerned primarily with disabled children and young people or with learners categorised as 'having special educational needs'. I do not think we can take an inclusion project very far if it is framed in such exclusive terms. Within England and internationally such a view obscures excluding pressures based on wealth, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class and attainment. A narrow view of inclusion concedes the inclusion agenda to central government, and hides the exclusionary force of a competitive system of education in which schools are seen as failing corner shops or successful supermarkets. (pp.78/9)

My concept of inclusion offers appropriate activities to those who show real sporting potential (or to use the Governments' label, the 'Gifted and Talented') at the same time as offering a sense of success to those who still struggle with their co-ordination. Inclusive education values all students and the progress that they are able to make in relation to their *own* abilities, it does not compare. Jorgensen (1998) states that:

Inclusive schools seek to [c]reate a school culture in which differences are celebrated, not merely tolerated or accommodated, and in which every student is seen as talented and as having a contribution to make. (Jorgensen, 1998, p.xvii).

I would question whether there is any place for inclusive education in an environment that strives towards competitive success. My research asks whether the diverse aims of participation and performance can possibly co-exist, or whether one inevitably remains in the shadow of the other.

### **1.3 Approaches to the Problem**

The primary aim of this research is to investigate whether it is possible for an institution to follow both of these agendas, or whether one inevitably gains priority, at the potential expense of some of the students. I aim to discover whether an educational institute, striving for excellence in one subject area, could equally encourage mass participation within that same area. In researching the question of prioritisation between social inclusion and elitism, I

use one SSC as an example. Studying the school in-depth, I discuss how agendas were juggled and priorities set. Of primary importance is how choices made affect the ethos of the school.

After critically reviewing the theoretical literature discussing the emergence of Specialist Colleges, and SSCs in particular, I compare the theory to the reality, by exploring the day-to day running of a SSC. I also examine the literature of social justice in order to clarify for myself how I think a 'good' school should look and what I expect to see in terms of an inclusive education, particularly with regard to PE. Within this section (2.3) I touch upon the child's self-perception. On questioning the Government's use of the term 'ethos' I found a whole new bank of literature that needed exploring. If I wanted to know how a specialism was influencing the ethos of the school, then what exactly did I mean by 'ethos'? Though numerous other topics could have been included in my Case Study, I chose these as my three primary areas of literature review.

The primary questions that I attempt to answer in my study of the school are:

- Does the school's status affect the ethos<sup>6</sup> of the school?
- Is that ethos, if one exists, also manifest through everyday lessons and events, outside of the realm of physical education?
- Is that ethos based upon concepts of inclusion or elitism? Or is it possible that both elements could co-exist?
- What effect does that ethos have on the self-perception of the children?

The overall ethos of the school (and how that ethos was reflected in the teaching) were the main indicators of the agenda that the school was prioritising.

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<sup>6</sup> I will assume that there is an ethos at the school, even if that 'ethos' is fractured and contradictory.

My aim was first to discover what staff and pupils perceived as being the ethos of the school, and then to see if this was played out through lessons and school events.

## 1.4 Theoretical Framework

Let us be clear from the outset that social inclusion, meaning the acceptance and involvement of all children within our schools, conflicts with school improvement as measured by National Curriculum tests and GCSE results.

(Parsons, 1999, p.179)

As a product of public sector schooling I feel very strongly that there is a need to provide a good quality *free* education for all pupils. I believe that all schools should offer the same quality to the consumer and so provide an equal opportunity for all succeed. Each step towards the New Labour ideals of diversity and choice, as I understand it, takes us one step further away from the opportunity for all to receive an equal education. Equity does not fit within the key criteria of achieving excellence (Coffield, 2007, p.23)

It seems that when words such as 'equity' and 'justice' are used by politicians and policy-makers, they are often used rather liberally and in their shallowest sense. It would take the rest of this thesis and an additional few volumes to explore the length and the depth of social justice, but it is on a concept of fairness within education that this research is founded. Slee (2001) discusses the work of Ball (1994) and questions whether there is any place for inclusion within our modern educational system:

Should we be asking, inclusion into what? When we see narrowing forms of academic curriculum reified through national testing, league tables and pernicious inspection regimes reinforced through media campaigns of public vilification of 'failing schools', and the institutionalisation of marginality through Pupil Referral Units it is hard to imagine the place for an inclusive culture.

(Slee, 2001, p.118)

I acknowledge that our educational system is now aligned with business structures of 'performativity', but I hope that there is still some space left within

the curriculum to teach children that value can be found within systems that have no monetary worth. Whilst all children cannot help but be aware that our society produces 'winners' and 'losers' through an exclusive mode of 'jumping through certain hoops', I hope (perhaps rather naively) that there is still space for valuing diversity and individual strengths which do not necessarily conform to 'the system'.

The conflict that Parsons (1999) mentions at the opening of this section is one that I have experienced in my own primary teaching career. The school where I taught for my first seven years had its catchment area televised as an example of one of the most deprived areas in the Midlands, and the school usually sat at the bottom of league tables. The children's pre-school 'education' meant that a large number of them came into the school with little respect for property, other children, teachers and rules, and with minimal interest in acquiring knowledge. As teachers we did not (*could* not) aim for Standard Attainment Test statistics that would sit comfortably alongside the most successful schools in the Midlands (though we did have some very able children), we could only hope to teach the majority of the children some basic skills, respect for other people and, most importantly, some belief in themselves. If we could help them discover their strengths and some pride in what they *were* able to do then we felt that we had succeeded<sup>7</sup>. In my seven years at that school I felt that we had made fantastic progress, and had a positive impact on many children's lives, but that never changed our position in the condemnatory league tables and would be deemed far from acceptable today.

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<sup>7</sup> It was very different at the Fresh Start school that I have most recently worked at. Here the ability and social background of the clientele was no factor, a huge increase in results was expected yearly.

I view the impact of education on the future of society as vital. Whether that education is a 'gatekeeper' allowing only the elite through to future success, or whether it empowers and enriches all, could transform the societies that we each belong to (Connell, 1993). The 'primary good' that I was looking for in my research was the right of each student within an institution to an equal share of their teacher's time and consideration. This may be in their class teaching, in planning for extra-curricular activities or in planning for special events. For example, it would be unfair to arrange a school disco with the *implication* that it really was only for those who could dance. If it was known from past experience that only the good dancers were actually allowed onto the dance floor, then, although all were welcome, a large majority of children who were aware of their inadequacy, would not bother attending. I am aware that sports are a little like this. The *implication* (it does not need to be stated) is that the teachers are arranging the activity for children with some sporting talent, so why would a child bother attending, or enthusiastically taking part, if they already felt inadequate? Within my research I was eager to discover whether the pupils felt that they were all equally important in the eyes of their teachers, or whether they felt that certain groups of students were favoured due to their sporting prowess.

When Parsons (1999) discusses the conflict between social inclusion and school improvement he sums up very succinctly the tensions present in our current educational system. A school can strive for an inclusive atmosphere, where effort and personal improvement are valued more highly than grades. A school can strive to fulfil the Government's obsession with targets (Coffield, 2007, p.3), in examination and sporting results; but it would be difficult to

incorporate both aims<sup>8</sup>. Sport has historically been deeply embedded in competition and exclusion; and if you add to this a fiercely selective educational system measured by examination results, then you have a SSC. Cooper (1980), whilst acknowledging that there must always be conflict between “attending to excellence and attending to an evenly spread, average improvement” (p.55) takes it as given that the lion’s share of time and resources should, obviously, go to the talented. He goes so far as to say:

...there is rarely a serious question as to the preferred alternative. Such a question, in fact, is hardly met with in practice-for who would suggest that resources be diverted from encouraging musical or athletic talent to making the average violinist a bit more adept or the average sprinter a bit faster? Does anyone suggest that coaches devote just the same time and energy to enthusiastic tortoises as to the Achilles on the brink of Olympic victory? Or that the only available, high-quality violin be equally available to the prodigy and to the ordinary scraper?  
(Cooper, 1980, p.55)

It is difficult to believe that Cooper is talking about ‘Equality in Education’ (the heading to the chapter from which the above excerpt was taken) and he has made some assumptions with which I wholeheartedly disagree. If my son attended a school that had a ‘high-quality violin’ I would expect him to have every right to equal use of that violin in comparison with other children, even if he was the world’s worst ‘scraper’. If he was preparing for sports day then I would expect just as much time to be put into his preparation (though he may be just an ‘enthusiastic tortoise’) as the next child’s - however gifted that child may be athletically. Cooper’s is a passionate plea for students to reach dizzying heights of talent; his concern is not with the average. In his quest for excellence Cooper seems to suggest that within education children are *not* all entitled to equal care and attention from their teachers. And worse still, that the more talent that they already have, the more resources they are then entitled to. One can only hope

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<sup>8</sup> I am not suggesting that both approaches might not lead to an improvement in results, only that it would be difficult to promote both approaches equally.



that Cooper is referring to the type of education that is nurtured by experts *outside* of school. We would expect neither an Olympic runner nor a world-class musician to be coached by their schoolteacher, though we would expect that teacher to encourage them in their endeavours. Within a school one would presume that it is each pupil's fundamental right to an equal share of all of the resources that she/he requires.

I do not believe that improving sporting talent is the role of teachers, though this may conflict with the requirements of the SSC Mission Statement. I believe that if talent emerges, then it should be directed towards expert coaches elsewhere. This would supply the best quality coaching to the child, at the same time as retaining the sanity of already incredibly over-stretched teachers. The role of the school, I believe, is to foster all of those personal qualities that will strengthen a child in their adult life. Excellence in any one area will not supply an individual with all of the resources needed to cope with the rigours of day-to-day living. To develop leadership and teamwork skills, motivation, commitment, confidence and independence are all vital roles of education. Unfortunately, education has become so enmeshed in the need to achieve statistical results that the space left for nurturing the above qualities is ever decreasing.

Although The Government has been heard extolling such phrases as 'lifelong learning', 'participation' and 'inclusion', it still focuses on "certified output" (Coffield, 2007, p.5). Coffield (2000) comments on the Government tendency to "admit readily to the importance of informal learning" but to "develop policy, theory and practice without further reference to it" (p.2). Walton (2000) points out that, "There is no consistent and accepted form of accreditation for much of what the disaffected and disadvantaged might achieve" (p.81). Walton, amongst

others, stresses the need for a change of emphasis to those meritocratic, immeasurable benefits that studying can achieve, if a learning lifestyle is to be successfully promoted. It is with a concern that such qualities may become overshadowed by a quest for competitive success within the SSC environment that I embarked on this research.

Because my aim was to hear the voices of those involved in the specialist process, rather than to study statistics, my research takes the form of a Case Study. Numbers would not tell me if certain students were made to feel insignificant by their school's specialism, only talking to them would. In best anthropological tradition I seek to explore the perspectives of participants, the relationship between events and the points of conflict (Janesick, 1994). These things, of course, cannot be analysed in any statistical way, and so, instead, after immersing myself in the data I reach 'fuzzy conclusions' (Bassey *et al*, 2001) about the typicality of events.

## 1.5 Methodological Overview

Being an ethnographer means that I work small. I am interested in events and specifics and locations, in contingencies, concatenations and contexts, in the odd as much as the typical. The critical case is a powerful analytical device.  
(Ball, 2006, p.4)

Like much of Ball's research, this was a 'small' study. It scrutinised just one school, using a Case Study approach, over a period of three years. Research focused on a single school in order to produce in-depth, primarily qualitative empirical data about the actual effects *on individuals* of the abstract theories and principles of SSC status. To quote Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) this study aims to produce "human-scale data on macro-political decision-making, fusing theory and practice" (p.183). To produce masses of quantitative data was not the aim of this research, although a large-scale questionnaire was used to

provide a broad sweep from which areas of qualitative research could then be honed. My primary method of data collection was observation.

Although prior to the onset of this research I had been of the largely positivist presumption that there were facts out there and I would discover them, I soon found that this was an extremely naïve view of knowledge. Within days of the study I discovered that where one participant saw white, another saw black. All that I would be able to do was present this information, reflect on it and form some interpretations. My interpretation would not hold any *more* value than that of the participants, but my reflections should be considered in conjunction with recorded observations and participants' comments.

### ***Methods of Research***

The following research methods were used during this Case Study:

- A study of relevant theoretical literature
- A study of other relevant literature, e.g. Government and School documents
- Discussion with the Director of Sport, the point of contact at the school
- Regular visits to the school in order to become a 'familiar face'
- Extensive field notes
- Structured and unstructured observation of lessons, extra-curricular activities, events and every-day occurrences
- Casual conversation and semi-structured interviews with students and staff
- Questionnaire, to both students and staff<sup>9</sup>
- Questionnaire to Governors and feeder schools
- Reflection and theorising

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<sup>9</sup> I very quickly discovered that the interviews that I had planned were not going to happen. The staff were too eager to keep both their anonymity and their own time.

All of the data collection processes were based within the natural context of the school. The primary source of information with relation to inclusion was physical education lessons and extra-curricular physical activities. Some observations of other subject areas were also carried out, to assess whether such a thing as 'a sporting ethos' pervaded the school and how this manifested itself through other subject areas.

Discussions with PE staff focused upon how they coped with the diverse demands that were being placed on them and how they felt that they were benefiting from, and improving their teaching through, the school's status. Interviews with staff from other subject areas sought their opinion about the funding given to the P.E. department, and whether they believed that they had obtained any benefit from it. Interviews with children focused on their interest in physical activity, their perceptions of the school culture and their sense of self-worth within the ethos of the school.

## **1.6 Structure of the Thesis**

It is easy to imagine just how many areas of interest became entangled when carrying out this Case Study and the literature review was in danger of becoming endless. Eventually I managed to limit the literature review, (found in Chapter Two), down to the three areas that I believed to be most relevant to my study. First, I explore the emergence of the phenomenon of the Specialist School. How did the educational landscape in England change so significantly and so rapidly? I look at the development of the Specialist School and the ramifications caused by it. I look at conflicting views of the Specialist System's success and the criticisms levelled at it. Finally I explore the particularly

problematic arena of Physical Education and the problems inherent in the 'Sports' specialism that are not encountered in other subject areas.

In the second section of the literature review I examine concepts of social justice within education. Here I question the aims of our current educational system; what are its aims and whom does it serve? Should the drive behind our educational system be holistic or economical? Do we want good workers or good citizens? Within this section I set the parameters for what I believe to be a good education and compare this to our current system, straight-jacketed by assessment and accountability, within which specialisms are being developed.

In the final section of the literature review I critically appraise the idea of culture, or ethos, terms used frequently within Specialist School policy literature. One element of the specialist development is that when schools adopt a specialism they also create a new 'ethos'. I question whether ethos is the correct term for the type of changes that the Government suggests and I also question whether this is an achievable goal.

Chapter Three is something of a journey of self-discovery. It reveals my presumptions upon starting this research and my growing understanding as I progressed within it. It explores the Case Study as a form of investigation and my role within the research. Chapter Three also highlights the ethical implications of the research before introducing the various forms of data. I discuss data analysis in this chapter, and the limitations and delimitations of the study.

In Chapter Four I present the data. I contextualise the school and discuss problems with access, which had a huge influence on the data collected. I then examine the culture of the school as exemplified by the physical environment,

the way learning is structured, relationships and the opinions of the staff and students. Here I discover that there was, in reality, no shared culture at the school and, on the contrary there were many perceptions of it. Therefore, instead of exploring the impact of a dominant culture, I examine the effect that specialist sports status had on the school and its inhabitants, including the school's approach to inclusion and excellence.

In Chapter Five I analyse the data collected, looking for themes and recurrences. Here I question the amount of impact that the specialism has actually had on the school. And in Chapter Six I critically evaluate my research findings in order to reach conclusions, making suggestions for the modification of Specialist School policy. I also suggest recommendations for future research, and within this discussion I question whether there is any place for the Case Study as a research tool within the present educational climate.

### ***Summary***

In this chapter I have presented the development of my original ideas and plans for my research, many of which, over time, developed and transformed. In the next chapter I explore the policy and theory that helped to develop the focus of my investigation.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Review of Literature**

#### ***Overview***

Within this chapter I explain why the areas of the Specialist School, Education and Social Justice and School Culture were chosen as the most appropriate topics for literature review. Within Social Justice I also touch upon concepts of self-esteem and how this can be affected by the transparent nature of ability in Physical Education. In exploring school culture I attempt to clarify what, exactly, the Government was referring to when it used the rather nebulous term 'ethos'.

### **2.1 A Rationale and Framework for the Literature Review**

#### ***Introduction***

When I embarked on this research, what now seems like a lifetime ago, the specialist college was still something of a novelty. In 2008 it is those schools that do not have specialist status that have become the 'odd one out', with 88% of all maintained schools in England having achieved specialist status ([www.dfes.gov.uk](http://www.dfes.gov.uk), accessed 1/03/08). Because of this my first section of literature review focuses on a period of rapid proliferation of the Specialist School, predominantly 2001-2004 when my field research took place, and the many debates that surrounded the expansion.

The second section of my literature review discusses ideas of social justice and their relevance to the educational infrastructure in England. Finally, in the third section, I look at concepts of culture. Numerous Government educational proposals referred to these new Specialist Schools developing their own 'ethos', but this term remains somewhat elusive. I studied the literature in

this area in order to attain a clearer vision of exactly what is meant by the term, and, as you will read shortly, came to the conclusion that the word ‘culture’ would have been far more apt.

## 2.2 The Phenomenon of the Specialist School

The year on year rise in the number of schools entering the Specialist Schools programme has ensured that such schools are now a significant feature of the education landscape. (Gorard and Taylor, 2001, p.371)

The emergence of the Specialist School has happened with rapidity. On the commencement of this research in September 2001 there was very little in the way of published work relating to the development of the Specialist School. Ofsted had, of course, produced their evaluations of how things were progressing, but these amounted to little more than ‘snapshots’ of good practice in successful Specialist Schools (Ofsted, 2000, 2001). On re-assessing the literature, over the intervening years, published references had proliferated. The increased momentum with which Specialist Schools were appearing had created the need for some robust research into their effectiveness and the reasons for their apparent success. The tables ‘proving’ an increase in GCSE results for Specialist Schools (Jesson and Taylor, 2002) were no longer enough, and issues of diversity and choice had become a weighty issue (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2003). Before exploring these emerging debates, it is necessary to explore the policy development in some detail. How has, what was just a short time ago the ‘phenomenon’ of the Specialist School, so quickly become the norm?

What makes education policy<sup>10</sup> so tricky is that it is very rare that a policy will actually tell you *how* things should be done, it is far more likely to “create

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<sup>10</sup> By ‘policy’ I refer to the simplest, Oxford Dictionary definition of the word, as “a course or principle of action adopted or proposed by an organisation or an individual”.



circumstances in which the range of options available...are narrowed or changed or particular goals or outcomes are set” (Ball, 2006, p.46). Educational policy is particularly complicated, because it is within this realm that “the tensions between the economic and cultural imperatives...are mostly clearly revealed” (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard and Henry, 1997, p.vii). The adoption of the Specialist School is just one aspect of what Taylor *et al* (1997) refer to as the ‘marketisation of education’; by which process the “clear-cut public-private divisions between state activities and those of the market have been blurred” (p.89). City Technology Colleges heralded a merging of the public and private sectors, which was significantly expanded with the Specialist Schools venture.

In recent years applying for Specialist School status has shifted in priority from a novel choice into a necessity. In 2003 the Government made clear its intentions to “**create a new specialist system where every school has its own special ethos...**” (DfES, 2003a, p.5, *emphasis in original*). In their Green Paper it was viewed as unequivocal that Specialist Schools were a success (DfES, 2003b, p.13) and that they expected all schools to follow their example. By 2002 the future for non-Specialist Schools had already begun to look rather bleak, the DfES White Paper said:

Every school will have incentives to develop a Specialism. New investment will create at least 33 Academies, 300 Advanced Schools and a further 1,000 Specialist Schools by 2006, bringing the total to at least 2,000. Thereafter *we want all schools who are ready to be awarded specialist status*. Federations will enable each school to play to its strength under specialist leadership. *Weaker schools will receive intensive support and be closed if they do not improve.*

(DfES, 2002b, p.17, *my emphasis*)

The position of ‘weaker schools’ within this paragraph makes it synonymous with ‘those schools that are not successful enough to achieve a specialism’. In order to answer the question of how something that was an

option had so quickly become an imperative for all schools, we need to track its development.

### ***The Planting of the Specialist School Empire***

Despite the rapidity of its current growth the concept of the specialist college has actually been in operation for just over twenty years. Sir Cyril Taylor established the City Technology Colleges Trust in 1987, with the aim of forging a mutually beneficial partnership between education and business<sup>11</sup> (Specialist Schools Trust, 2003a, p.1), and the first City Technology College opened in 1988. As modest numbers of colleges appeared each year, the Government took an interest in their progress, and by 1992 it was recommending that all grant-maintained, or voluntary-aided schools set up as Technology Colleges. The first fifty Government-supported Technology Colleges opened in 1994. That same year the Specialist Schools initiative was opened to all schools and the option of a language specialism was introduced (Specialist Schools Trust, 2003b). In 1995 the first 16 language colleges were designated, and in 1996 the specialisms of Art and Sport were introduced.

In 1996 Specialist Schools were dubbed the ‘schools of the future’, with a mission statement setting out the many benefits that they had to offer, including increased choice, improved teaching, raised standards and “particularly rich experiences in their chosen specialisms over and above the provisions of the National Curriculum” (DfEE, 1996, p.1). By 1997 it was decided that the Specialist Schools system would play a major part in plans to create “higher standards for all” (DfEE, 1997, p.1). Increased ‘output’ in terms of raised

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<sup>11</sup> It was thought that a relationship between business and education would be mutually beneficial in that it would provide schools with extra funding, whilst providing business with an adequately trained workforce. Business would have a say in the skills that pupils were to be taught as long as they were able to supply the sponsorship.

examination achievements was clearly stated as the objective of Specialist Schools (DfEE, 1996, p.7). Measurable results (in terms of GCSE results) were observed (DfES, 2001, p.40), and whether these were due to the increase in funding or the changed 'ethos' of the school was not yet a point of debate. All schools were being encouraged to choose a specialism. Meeting the criteria would be tough and it was openly named a 'competition'<sup>12</sup> to be accepted onto the programme.

### ***What is a Specialist School?***

The Specialist Schools programme helps schools, in partnership with private sector sponsors, and supported by additional Government funding, to build on their particular strengths and establish distinctive identities through their chosen specialisms. (DfEE, 1997, p.5)

A Specialist School is a standard secondary or high school that has had an application accepted to attain Specialist School status. Though 'Specialist School' is predominantly used in literature, on being awarded the status many schools thereafter refer to themselves as a 'Specialist College'. This re-naming causes some confusion as 'college' most often refers to the education of pupils 16+ within the Further Education sector. The process of application requires a school to first choose a subject area that they deem to be a strength, it must be able to show an upward trend in its examination results in that subject (DfEE, 2000, p.7). The school then needs to:

Draw up a development plan  
Commit itself to measurable performance indicators and quantified performance targets  
Build ongoing links with sponsors (DfEE, 1996, p.5)

These plans, in addition to benefiting their own pupils, must also benefit other schools and their wider community. The most significant obstacle to

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<sup>12</sup> It seems somewhat ironic that it is openly referred to as a 'competition' to gain Government funding for a specialism, yet 'collaboration' and the sharing of good practice are stated as some of the main aims of specialism (DfES, 2003, p.11). Finding 'common agendas' between 'winners' and 'losers' is always going to be difficult as Aiston *et al* (2002) discovered in their research.

applying is that the school must also attempt to raise funding of £50,000 (previously £100,000) through private sector sponsorship<sup>13</sup>. If the school's application is successful then in addition to the sponsorship that the school has raised they will be awarded a one-off capital grant of £100, 000 by the DfES. The school will also receive additional funding approximating to £129 per pupil per annum, dependant on pupil numbers. This funding lasts for four years before the school needs to apply for re-designation.

The aims of the Specialist Schools programme have changed slightly over the past decade, particularly with reference to developing a distinctive 'ethos', which I look at in more detail later, but they remain essentially true to the aims stated in 1997, which were that the schools would commit themselves to:

becoming local and regional centres of achievement and excellence in their specialist subjects;

raising standards of achievement for all their students of all abilities;

developing and sharing their good practice; and

being active partners in a learning society, with their local families of schools and their communities.

(DfEE, 1997, p.1)

Some may have expected that the Specialist Schools programme, with its emphasis on favouring individual schools, would have been ended with the introduction of a Labour Government, traditional supporters of the comprehensive schooling system, in 1997. Those who worked in the education sector "hoped that there would be a lull in the avalanche of legislation, policy

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<sup>13</sup> This has been seen as a real bone of contention as, obviously, it is a hurdle stopping many schools applying because of their situation within the economic landscape, e.g. how would rural schools raise that sort of sponsorship? The Government have now responded to this with the New Partnership Fund, which will assist with this funding in situations where schools "have made sustained efforts to raise sponsorship" (DfES, 2003, p.21). In 2008 394 schools have benefited from this ([www.dcf.gov.uk](http://www.dcf.gov.uk), accessed 06/06/08). In addition the DfES made some attempt to alleviate the difficulties of smaller schools applying for sponsorship, by requiring them to attain £100 in sponsorship for each pupil on roll. This is subject to a minimum of £20,000 and a maximum of £50,000.

initiatives and reform” (Tomlinson, 2003, p.195) that they had been struggling with. Instead New Labour readily adopted the Specialist Schools initiative and its expansion was pledged. In 2001 the Government White Paper made explicit the link between education, ‘economic health’ and the need to succeed in a “competitive global economy” (DfES, 2001, p.5). Pupils, it stated, should be equipped for this material-driven world, and so it followed that the private sector should get involved in education. Whether the ultimate aim of this was to develop a practical way of adhering the world of education to the world of work, or whether it was it just an effective ploy to inject more funds into an under-resourced area of Governmental responsibility is open for debate. In *Schools Achieving Success* the Government set the target of re-inventing 1,500 secondary schools as Specialist Colleges by the year 2005 (DfES, 2001, p.37). They also added four new specialisms; engineering; science; business and enterprise and mathematics and computing, taking the total to eight (p.41). That target figure was all but reached two years early, with a listed 1,445 Specialist Colleges (46 percent of maintained schools) being in operation in September 2003. The Government’s plans for the transformation of secondary education then continued without any deceleration.

In 2003 the Government set out its key reforms for education. The first of the four reforms stated the desire to see all schools developing their own specialist identity and culture and spreading good practice (DfES, 2003b, p.5). A *New Specialist System: Transforming Secondary Education* stressed the Government’s aim to see all schools becoming specialist and gave the new figure of ‘at least 2000 Specialist Schools by 2006’ (2003b, p.5). It also introduced a further two new specialisms, humanities and music, bringing the

total to ten. In 2004 Specialist Schools were given the option of adopting a second specialism upon their re-designation. In 2006 there were 2,502 Specialist Schools, plus over 100 academies<sup>14</sup> open or in development. This made up over 80% of all eligible maintained secondary schools (Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, [www.specialistschools.org.uk](http://www.specialistschools.org.uk), accessed 29/7/07). The option of special schools choosing a subject specialism and schools taking on combined specialisms was also introduced. In the eyes of this New Labour Government at least, the specialist college is here to stay, but its rapid emergence has raised many questions.

### ***The 'Success' of Specialist Schools***

Early results suggested that there had been a percentage increase in 5 GCSEs at grades A\*-C, that was 10% higher in Specialist Schools than in non-Specialist Schools (DfES, 2001). Just a few months earlier, the Government Green Paper *Schools Building on Success* had suggested an overall percentage increase in examination grades of 6.1% (DfEE, 2001). These figures would suggest that the achievement divide between specialist and non-Specialist Schools was growing at a rate that was nothing short of miraculous. Yeomans *et al* (2000) performed their own research and were a little more reticent about the results. They found that the rapid improvement in Specialist Schools overall “masked considerable variations between the schools” (p.2). Although in eight of the twelve Specialist Schools that they studied, the percentage of pupils achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A\*-C had increased since they gained their specialism, in one third it had declined” (p.2). In response to the need for a

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<sup>14</sup> Academies are publicly funded independent schools. They are all ability schools established by sponsors from business, faith or voluntary groups working in partnership with central Government and LEAs ([www.standards.dfes.gov.uk](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk) accessed 21/09/07).

set of reliable results, Professor David Jesson, supported by the Technology Colleges Trust (now the Specialist Schools Trust, the lead body for the Specialist Schools programme), produced *Value Added and the Benefits of Specialism*, which was published in 2002. This piece of research has since become The Government's foundational proof in support of its current initiatives. Jesson's analysis used a 'simple yet powerful regression formula' to predict the results that a school should have achieved at GCSE from its original intake. This then resulted in a 'value added' score for the school (p.4). Jesson claimed that this method of measurement was much fairer than previous tables of comparisons as it took into account the poorer intake of schools (in terms of academic achievement) in socially disadvantaged areas. The results of Jesson's enquiry appear as extensive lists of tables. In summary these show that the 510 Specialist Schools studied produced a value added score of +4.0, whereas the 'other' schools only achieved -1.0. The difference of +5.0 gave "strong support to the Government's decision to expand the number of Specialist Schools..." (Jesson and Taylor, 2002, p.5).

Rather than the powerful simplicity that Jesson was striving for in his results, Schagen and Goldstein (2002) found his work 'misleading', 'muddled' and 'far from clear' (pp.12/13). They could not understand why, when there is general agreement by academics on how value-added analysis should be carried out, Jesson failed to follow any of the guidelines. Schagen and Goldstein question why Jesson appropriately started with pupil-level data, but then completed his analysis at a school level (composite GCSE grades). In addition they note that Jesson rejected the use of complex, but efficient, multi-level modelling, which would compute the uncertainty of the estimates presented, in

favour of his own methods. These do not convince Schagen and Goldstein (2002), who observed that his results are “a lot of numbers, graphs and formulae, but nowhere is there any acknowledgement of uncertainty or presentation of confidence intervals” (p.13). Finally, they question Jesson’s failure to take into account such variables as the percentage of children on free school meals<sup>15</sup>. The same criticism was levelled by Gorard and Taylor (2001), who stress that, “The importance of student background factors in assessing relative performance is paramount” (p.367).

Goldstein (2001) had similar queries concerning Jesson’s research, but also added that it did not take into account achievement prior to KS2, or the complications that arise through pupil mobility. Goldstein’s strongest criticism, though, is saved for the fact that Jesson’s work was never opened to peer - review. He criticized the DfES’s use of Jesson’s results to support their policy as “opportunistic” and stressed that when research is used as ‘evidence’ for Government policy it should be required to go through some kind of stringent validation process (Goldstein, 2001, p.4). The House of Commons Education and Skills Committee (HCESC) also censured the use of a researcher with “too close an alliance” to the Government and said that in all their “over-reliance on a narrow range of research on the comparative performance of Specialist Schools has served to obscure rather than illuminate the issue” (2003, pp.29 & 44).

Schagen Davies, Rudd and Schagen (2002) sought to produce their own value-added analysis of specialist and faith schools in, what they believed, was a more appropriate manner. In *The Impact of Specialist and Faith Schools on*

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<sup>15</sup> The HCESC (2003) argue that even free school meals (FSM) are not a sufficient indicator of socio-economic composition. To become one, we would also need to know about the percentage of children who are not on FSM, are many of them just above the qualifying line or do they come from affluent homes? They suggest that more sensitive measures of deprivation are needed (p.33).



*Performance* they used linear regression and multi-level modelling to examine how *different types* of Specialist Schools performed compared to non-Specialist Schools, in terms of value-added. They looked at how attending a Specialist School impacted *throughout the ability range* and whether, within any LEA, the existence of Specialist Schools had a negative impact on *other* schools (p.6). Their results did not significantly diverge from earlier investigations; any differences that they did find were slight. In fact, on the whole, their findings supported earlier research, showing that some Specialist Schools do perform above expectations. But Schagen *et al* (2002) stressed that even though they had increased some of the variables under investigation, some relevant factors such as parental support were *not* taken into account, and that the reasons for Specialist Schools' success still remain clouded by the issue of additional funding. They concluded:

There are also questions about whether the enhanced performance of Specialist Schools is due at least in part to the additional funding which they receive. It would be worthwhile to undertake a further study, using qualitative and quantitative methods, to explore these issues further. (Schagen *et al*, 2002, p.v)

Somewhat ironically, when Schagen and Schagen investigated Specialist Schools again in 2005, they still used only statistics. It was large scale and multi-level, but, basically more of the same, with similar results, proving the need for a more qualitative investigation in this area.

Gorard and Taylor questioned the 'future prospects' of the Specialist School in 2001. They raised a few pertinent points, starting, like Schagen *et al* with a critique of Jesson and Taylor's 2002 analysis. In addition to criticisms already stated they discussed how Jesson and Taylor 'down played' the influence that additional funding would have (p.367). They added that whilst overlooking the differences in funding, Jesson and Taylor also ignored "the fact

that proportionately more designated Specialist Schools are of single-sex, ex-grammar, and foundation status than would be expected” (p.367). Finally, they point out that because a school is sited, for example, within an inner city area, this does not necessarily mean that, “they serve a representative section of the local community” (p.367).

It seems that by January 2003 even Professor Jesson had to admit that his analysis was fallible. In a correspondence he said:

Even though this method is called ‘value added’- it does *not* compare like with like in any reasonable manner: it appears to operate precisely in the direction of favouring schools with ‘high’ intakes, whilst at the same time disadvantaging those in more difficult circumstances.

(Jesson, 2003, cited by HCESC, 2003, p.31)

### ***Creating a Two-Tier Educational System?***

By 2001 concerns were being voiced that the Specialist Schools initiative was creating a two-tier system of education, which opposed everything that social justice, and the principles of comprehensive schooling stood for (Gorard and Taylor, 2001, Henry and Hutchins, 2001, Thornton, 2001). This had accelerated by 2003, when Tomlinson commented:

...New Labour’s education policies, despite a rhetoric of inclusion, and a declared commitment to social justice, have largely ensured that the education system remains divided and divisive, particularly in socio-economic terms.

(Tomlinson, 2003, pp195-196)

Educational spokespeople increasingly asked why a large number of our children were being denied the benefits that others were reaping<sup>16</sup>. This point of dissension was directly addressed in *Schools Achieving Success*, which claimed that the development of specialisms supported rather than opposed the principles of comprehensive education. It stated:

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<sup>16</sup> Margaret Tulloch of the Campaign for Real Education asked the question why, if specialist status is of such benefit to pupils “are we deliberately denying that benefit to half of all secondary school children?”(BBC News, 2001, para.15). The specialist system was attacked by the National Association of Governors and Managers as “divisive, selective, and likely to increase the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged areas” (Thornton, 2001, para. 13).

There can be no question of a two tier system for tomorrow...We need to hold on to the values and principles that underpin our commitment to comprehensive education - that every child is special and that all children should have the opportunity and support to develop their skills and ability to fulfil their full potential - but apply them in a way that is appropriate to a 21<sup>st</sup> century world.

(DfES, 2001, p.6)

Unfortunately this claim does very little to negate the multi-level nature of division that the Specialist Schools programme appears to be creating. Before even applying for specialist status, there are those schools that will be able to raise the necessary funding, and those that will not; this was discussed by the HCESC (2003) in their paper entitled *Secondary Education: Diversity of Provision*. This paper is scathingly critical of the specialist college initiative. The House of Commons Committee, made up of predominantly Labour MPs, sought to examine the Government's current education strategy, and the initiative at the centre of it, the Specialist Schools programme. They were extremely cynical about what they found. Regarding the production of a 'two-tier system' the HCESC stated that though the amount of sponsorship needing to be raised had been reduced from £100,000 to £50,000, "this still represents a considerable and sometimes insurmountable difficulty for some schools in areas where schools and local industry alike face difficult circumstances" (2003, p.13). They were also dissatisfied with the potential of bias between subjects, with the likelihood of arts and humanities based specialisms finding it far more difficult to raise sponsorship than those subjects that can contribute significantly to the development of industry<sup>17</sup>. The HCESC did refer to the new partnership fund, developed for those schools that, after sustained efforts to raise funding, had

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<sup>17</sup> It seems to be arts specialisms in particular that have rather desperately looked to celebrities such as Mick Jagger, Robbie Williams, Mick Hucknall, Jamie Oliver and Anita Roddick as ex-pupils to help with the raising of sponsorship, as reported by the TES. See, for example White's 'Good, friends in High Places', TES, November 15<sup>th</sup> 2002, p.12.

still fallen short, but pointed out that its £3 million budget would only be sufficient to help a very small percentage of schools.

The introduction of the Academies programme in 2000 represented an acknowledgement by the Government that perhaps things were not so fair on underachieving schools. The Academies introduced a new focus on raising attainment in underprivileged areas and were seen as “an engine of social mobility” ([www.thestandardssite](http://www.thestandardssite), accessed 9/4/08). The Academies, though publicly funded, are run as independent schools and, like Specialist Schools, gain funding from building close relationships with local business. Unlike Specialist Schools this funding does not focus on developing the specialist subject, but looks at “counteracting the impact of deprivation” and providing “real life contexts” ([www.thestandardssite](http://www.thestandardssite), *ibid*). But was the introduction of Academies too little too late in terms of the increasing inequalities and potential animosities that the Specialist System has produced?

### ***A Growing Divide***

The very process and pre-requisites of specialist school application begin to separate schools and put them in competition with one another. Once funding is gained by the luckiest applicants, in addition to the obvious advantages that the money will bring, there is research to prove that the simple act of injecting capital investment into a school can sometimes lead, via improved teacher and pupil morale, to an improvement in pupil performance (Gorard and Taylor, 2001). This is the first way that specialist school's examination results may be improved.

The second way that the divide between schools could grow is that the additional specialist funding will make the school a far more attractive option.

And though only a tiny proportion of Specialist Schools admit to selection by ability, this may not be necessary in order to improve their results<sup>18</sup>. Gorard and Taylor (2001) cite an LEA admissions officer discussing the popularity of a specialist language college; he said that it is “highly sought after because if you’re doing languages you’re going to be bright...and if it’s a good school you’re going to go there” (p.378). West *et al* (2000) found the ratio of applicants increasing from 1 to 1.74 in their study schools after two years of specialist status. Of course, as the students improve, so do the results. Selection by ability can then continue covertly, with first preference going to the siblings of high achievers. Year on year this will make a substantial difference to the school’s intake and, therefore, to their examination results. Cyclically the popularity of the school is enhanced by specialist status, by its improved infrastructure and examination results, and so more high achieving pupils will apply to attend. Gorard and Taylor (2001) described this creaming of students as no more than ‘robbing Peter to pay Paul’ with no “overall improvement in educational standards” (p.369). As mentioned previously this phenomenon was investigated by Schagen *et al* (2002) and they found that in areas where Specialist Schools were situated, non-Specialist Schools did tend to perform “slightly below the norm at GCSE” (p.25). Taylor *et al* (2005) also noted a shift in the intake of schools between 1994/5 and 1999/2000. They found a section of schools, which included Specialist Schools, were beginning to attract a more socially privileged intake. Thus, the New Labour Government seemed to be creating a more socially segregated school system.

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<sup>18</sup> Houlihan and Wong (2005) actually found that there was a pervasive reluctance with SSCs to select by aptitude (p.5).

This, and not just the improvement of performance within Specialist Schools, was deemed to be of utmost importance by HCESC. They stated:

The Minister of State for School Standards told us that “the key test is whether becoming a Specialist School will help the school improve the education of the children in it”. While it would be hard to disagree with the sentiment behind this statement, it is equally important that specialist status in one school should not impact adversely on the education of children in neighbouring schools.

(HCESC, 2003, p.27)

They add that it is only when we know the extent of this effect, that “the extent to which public funds have been wisely spent, can be properly evaluated” (p.44). All of the above may inadvertently lead to an improvement in examination results in Specialist Schools, regardless of the school’s adeptness at fulfilling its targets, the quality of its teachers, or the culture created by its specialist status. Add to this the fact that Specialist Schools are granted their status because they are already ‘good and improving schools’ and it must be acknowledged that specialist status “has had the paradoxical effect of granting additional funding to some already successful and well funded schools” (HCESC, 2003, p.41) rather than benefiting those in the greatest need.

Professor Tomlinson of Leeds Metropolitan University commented that, “We’re losing parity of esteem...Slowly the differentiation being built into the system is eroding the principle of equality” (Revell, 2001, p.3). If this specialist development were really about school improvement, HCESC argue, then surely the focus would be on the improvement of struggling schools and not those that are already doing well (2003, p.41). Revell (2001) suggests that what subject specialism really is, is a form of rationing, with the Government “doling out additional monies only to those schools that can be guaranteed to ratchet up the results” (p.4).

The Government's defence against these claims is to stress that schools are to **collaborate** in order to share their improved knowledge and resources. In *A New Specialist System* (2003) the DfES stressed that schools should work in partnership, and they encouraged the development of federations of schools. Research has found, as was my own experience, that it is far easier for Specialist Schools to create partnerships with feeder schools than with fellow (non-specialist) secondary schools, with whom there are "difficulties establishing a common agenda" (Aiston *et al*, 2002, p.3, Houlihan and Wong, 2005). More prevalent than this, the results driven nature of our educational sector continues to focus on *competition* between schools, as Penney (2004) states:

Headlines of press releases and newspaper articles have captured the irony that the very schools singled out to lead the spread of innovative practice and support the raising of standards across local networks are under overt pressure to 'out-perform' the schools that they are meant to be working with. (p.4)

The HCESC (2003) believe that collaboration should, to some extent, be enforced, with "eligibility for the Specialist Schools programme" being contingent on "each school's membership of a community of schools and on the achievement of measurable improvements in pupil attainment across the group of schools" (p.45). There is no escaping the fact that Specialist Schools are in a "position of being 'different from' and 'better than'" (Penney, 2004, p.6) so perhaps they should be made to work a little harder for their elevated status. Because, after all, it is only natural that the most successful schools would want to keep their 'edge'. Hargreaves (2003) comments on this:

In a highly competitive climate, the pressure on school staff is to keep successful innovations to themselves in order to maintain their competitive edge, that is, position in the league tables and popularity among parents. Why give away one's best ideas? (p.52)

And it would seem that most aren't. When researching on behalf of the DfES, Levacic and Jenkins, (2004) found that, "There is no evidence as yet of

Specialist Schools' adding value to pupils in non-Specialist Schools" (p.30).

Furthermore, Castle and Evans (2006) question whether:

...Specialist Schools, even if they are more effective and have improved at a faster rate than non-Specialist Schools, have done so at the expense of other schools by attracting a large proportion of the local pool of better motivated and more able students than they had previously. (p.18)

Another early concern in this 'two-tier system' debate was the potential for it to become divisive in terms of gender stereotyping. Hackett (2001) voiced the Equal Opportunities Commission's (EOC's) fears that "Girls will end up in arts and languages colleges and the engineering and maths colleges will fill with boys" (Hackett, 2001, para.8) whilst Matthews (2001) looked at those views in a little more depth. Matthews expressed the EOC's concern that certain specialisms would become viewed as 'male' and 'female', thus preventing particular groups of students from applying and limiting their life chances. It was added that girls opting for typically 'female' jobs would exacerbate the likelihood of them finding themselves in less well-paid careers. The EOC believed that if the Government were to go ahead with its proposed reforms, it would be vital to increase initiatives to tackle stereotypes at primary school level (Matthews, 2001).

### ***Diversity and Choice***

...while the policies of choice and diversity appear to champion and reinforce equal opportunities, in practice they are simultaneously and actively reducing the scope for forms of collective action most likely to address the structural predicament of class and educational opportunity. (Harris and Ranson, 2005, pp.572/3)

Whilst The Government enthusiastically espoused the 'choice' that it was bringing into the schools market place, the claims were systematically dismantled by educational theorists such as Harris and Ranson (2005). Gorard and Taylor's 2001 research briefly suggests that with greater parental choice of school and greater diversity there is greater segregation and the socio-economic



stratification between schools increases (pp.370/1). The HCESC's 2003 paper discusses this in far more depth. It stresses that the Government's claims that specialisms offer more choice had led to "a significant mismatch of expectations" (p.20). Gorard and Taylor (2001) observed that where there is a wider disparity in education, it is the children from poorer socio-economic backgrounds that tend to fair worse; the typical achievement divide of those from more and less advantaged family backgrounds widens (HCESC, 2003, p.6/7). Whereas diversity can benefit those who are already advantaged, it can make things worse for the disadvantaged, who will inevitably end up 'pooled together'. HCESC (2003) discuss this effect:

School diversity impacts on schools' pupil intake in ways surely unimagined by policy makers. Wholly selective schools and schools that select a portion of their intake; the operation of parental preference; specialist, single sex and faith schools, all have the effect of narrowing down the pool from which the intakes of non-selective, non-Specialist Schools are drawn. Such schools therefore largely comprise the children of parents who fail to obtain a place in their preferred school and those who are unwilling or unable to exercise their preference. (p.10)

For some, the opportunity for their child to attend a good quality school is reduced. In the same vein Harris and Ranson (2005) argue that the introduction of specialisms is simply reinforcing "the competitive advantage of middle class parents" (p.582) and in doing so encouraging "an emergent hierarchy and segmentation of schooling" (p.582). McDonald (2003) summarises that, "It is middle-class families who exercise the freest choice" as low-income families "lack the money, transport, time and, sometimes, even the knowledge, to discriminate between schools" (2003, p.179).

In closing this section on choice the question must be asked: do the majority of parents actually want a choice anyway? Do they really see weighing up the pros and cons of a number of schools as an advantage or a

disadvantage? Ray Shostack, the Director of Children, Schools and Families for Hertfordshire LEA, put it this way:

What Hertfordshire parents say to me is that what they want is a high quality local school...it is public service and people have a right to get to a high quality local school and not have to, as it were, shop around for it.  
(Shostack, 2003,cited in HCESC, 2003, p.21)

Shostack does not believe that parents should have to work hard to find quality education for their children.

One final word on the 'fallacy' of choice should be given to Ball (2006), who found that when pupils reached the age of opting to move on to higher education, again their choices were narrowed. Because of the bind of per capita funding, schools encourage their pupils to stay where they are rather than to look further afield for courses in Higher Education that might suit their individual needs. Ball (2006) found that "HE colleges are not welcome into schools to advertise their courses and brochures from competing institutions are not available in 11-18 schools" (p.83). It seems schools cannot afford to consider the best needs of their children.

### ***Specialisms and the National Curriculum***

In a DfEE Research Brief (West *et al* 2000) it was reported that over half of the head teachers questioned by LSE confessed that their school's 'specialist subject' was not actually their strongest teaching area. Very often schools simply played the 'numbers game' and applied for the specialism least prevalent in their geographical area; and so most likely to gain them funding. In recent application guidance (2006/2007) the Government advises schools to look very carefully at the current infrastructure of their local area before deciding on a specialism (<http://www.standards.dfes.gov>). In 2001 Ofsted found that teaching within specialist subject areas was "broadly in line with the

national picture” (p.17) and again resorted to ‘snapshots’ to demonstrate teaching that was particularly effective in certain schools (pp.18/19). Learner (2001) used these findings to support the argument that if teaching was much the same, the slight increase in pupil performance in Specialist Schools could easily be put down to the funding (Learner, 2001, para.13).

Another point of disparity between Government claims and the actual enactment of their policies is to be found in the school’s ‘freedom’ to create a unique character and ethos. A further issue raised by the HCESC (2003) was that although the Government places great emphasis on Specialist Schools creating a distinctive ethos or character that reflects their specialism, in reality they are trapped within the heavy circumscription of the National Curriculum. The type of ‘diversity’ that the Government seeks is a superficial one, no more than a variety of schools in name alone (p.26). The extent to which this subject specialisation is then used by the school in their self-promotion is yet another potential minefield, as HCESC point out:

To play down the unique selling point of subject specialisation may be a risk in a competitive market and call into question the additional funding for the development of subject specialisms, while to overplay it risks discouraging parents and pupils who seek a good general education. (HCESC, 2003, p.25)

The HCESC argue that this tension between a good all-round education and specialist expertise will need to be tackled if Specialist Schools are to be the majority in the educational sector. The HCESC suggest that it may have been more useful if diversity within schools had been emphasised rather than diversity between schools. If there were greater curriculum flexibility within schools then educators would be able to respond more effectively to the needs of individual pupils (2003, p.26).

## **Conclusion**

Research into the effectiveness of the Specialist School phenomenon is far from complete. Currently any 'answer' that is reached in the Specialist School debate simply raises further questions. Is it possible to group any 'type' of school together for purposes of assessment or are there just too many factors involved? Intake, leadership, management, parental support, pupil mobility...any one factor will affect a school's likelihood to achieve. As Rudd *et al* (2002) found, many factors make a successful school: high quality teaching, strong leadership, curriculum improvements and so on. But only one thing, improved resources, can be directly related to specialist status. Is it *possible* to measure the success or failure of the Specialist Schools initiative? Or have we not seen any adequate evidence to date simply because there is no method of obtaining it? As we know that the success factors found in Specialist Schools reflect those found in all schools, should we simply accept that it is the extra funding that enables those final few grades to be obtained and nothing more? The lack of sound research that exists is summarised effectively by the HCESC:

It is a matter of concern that the Government has made its decision to extend access to the Specialist Schools programme, and associated funding to all schools, in the absence of clear evidence as to the alleged benefits of the specialism, balanced against those of other initiatives. Evaluation of this initiative is essential so that the public and policy makers alike can be assured that policy is developed on the basis of sound evidence rather than wishful thinking.  
(HCESC, 2003, p.34)

## 2.3 Education and Social Justice

Academics are, almost by definition, people who have been well served by the education system as it now is. They should never forget that there are many others who have been much worse served. (Connell, 1993, p.iii)

Who *does* the educational system actually serve? As it is such a massive public asset, absorbing a large portion of society's budget,<sup>19</sup> which individuals actually reap the benefits is a very serious question (Connell, 1993). Is ours an inclusive system where the needs of all are treated equally, or does it only favour the few? Is education the "complex interactions of hopes, aspirations and possible identities" (Glen, in James, 2004, p.12), or is it the production of a workforce? Tomlinson (1993) asks, "Is it about fulfilment or efficiency, and *can* it be both of those through the same means?" (p.62).

Carr and Hartnett (1996) stress that we cannot begin to debate the appropriateness or insufficiencies of our current educational system without first asking 'what is a satisfying and worthwhile life?' Education is a form of social reproduction serving general and vocational ends, so before I can decide "which existing patterns of political, economic and cultural life ought to be reproduced and which ought to be modified or transformed" (Carr and Hartnett, 1996, p.24) I must reach some sort of conclusion about what I believe to be the 'good life'. And, I must confess, it is my rather idealistic belief that we should be teaching children to become part of a community, not an economy. I veer away from the vocational and toward the more holistic approach to learning, developing the type of cultural awareness and social understanding that is necessary to maintain the common good. I discuss this in more detail later in this chapter.

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<sup>19</sup> In 2000 Gale and Densmore stated that schooling takes up to one quarter of society's budget. It would be interesting to see whether the increased input of industry funding into education has altered the equation.

Carr and Hartnett (1996) comment that education is an “essentially contested concept” (p.19) and that it is very difficult to isolate it from “the economic and ideological structures within which the process of social reproduction is played out” (p.22). Coffield (2007) finds it impossible to separate his views on further education from his experience in “areas of ingrained multiple deprivation” and the desperate need to “transfer resources from relatively advantaged to disadvantaged areas” (p.25). In Tomlinson’s (1993) view education encompasses the kind of society that we want our youths to build, or maintain. It is about ideas of control or freedom. In the present political and ideological climate vocational education is the dominant paradigm. Yet, Tarrant and Tarrant (2004) argue that, “There is no logical tie between education and the servicing of the economic system” (p.107). Students are not encouraged to look at society as a community of equal partners, but as one in which individuals “compete for economic rewards on the basis of their talents, skills, efforts and achievements” (Carr and Hartnett, 1996, p.23). It is an environment in which the lines between education and training for the world of work are blurred. The Government has made clear its current aims for education as an intrinsic element of economic regeneration:

To prosper in the 21<sup>st</sup> century competitive global economy, Britain must transform the knowledge and skills of its population. Every child, whatever their circumstances, requires an education that equips them for work and prepares them to succeed in the wider economy and in society. (DfES, 2001b, p.5)

As with all competitive systems this approach to education guarantees that there will be winners and losers. It cannot effectively serve all children,

There are particular problems that I see with our educational system, which are all intrinsically linked within the ideology of current initiatives. I would like to explore these issues within the context of the present educational climate,

with particular reference to the development of the Specialist School. They are: that our educational policies pay little or no attention to the need to create reflective, autonomous individuals. With the narrowing of focus to fulfilling prescribed criteria, the ethical aspect of education, which aims to nurture rounded individuals, and which focuses on “broad visions and ideals” has been lost to expedient processes (Taylor *et al*, 1997, p.3). The Specialist Schools initiative has played a role in the tendency to narrow vision to one particular aspect, to the detriment of others. Secondly, the provision of schooling in Britain does not provide opportunities for success for all. It does not cater to all needs. Our methods of certification perpetuate success for one segment of society and failure for another. Coffield (2007) comments, that division is perpetuated by our approach to examination, which ensures that each year 45% of children fail “to reach the minimal standard necessary for employability” (p.7). By pooling a school’s efforts into one particular subject area this will narrow opportunities for general success even further. And finally, there is inequality between schools. I do not refer to private schools, only to state-funded schools. Regardless of the aims of education, one would expect central control to ensure that all schools are supported equally, but increasingly this is not the case. Graham (1996) comments that:

There is now less equality, more stark contrasts than at any time since the war. Hard cheese if you happen to be a pupil in an under-funded, under-performing inner-city school in the mid 1990s. (cited in Penney and Evans, 1999, p.136)

The Specialist Schools system appears to be exacerbating this.

### ***Autonomy and Education***

Should school work be about learning how to learn for self-development in a social world oriented to mutual respect and support? Or is it about competitive individualism tied to individual self-interest and fragmented competencies - ‘outputs’ which promise (debatably) levels of achievement that can be readily measured? As we move away from the bureaucratised systems of industrialisation to the more

fluid insecurities of the twenty-first century, the first option may prove to be the more appropriate. (Rudduck, Chaplain and Wallace 1996, p.68)

Rudduck *et al* (1996) present a convincing argument that despite the industrialisation of our society we need to develop autonomy more than ever. Lifestyles are increasingly insecure and we need a strong sense of self-understanding to cope with that. Yet in reality opportunities to develop a sense of self have less space within swamped school curricular than ever before.

I have already explored how, within the present political paradigm the aim of education is to produce an effective future workforce, as opposed to creating the type of positive social qualities that build a strong social life. But if education is still acknowledged as being an individual right, and I believe that it is, then a part of that right should be that education provides the means by which an individual is able to understand and assess the society of which she or he is a member. Carr and Hartnett (1996) argue that it is just the opposite:

Subjects which may promote the critical evaluation of a contemporary society - such as social studies - tend to be marginalized and pupils are taught about 'the world of work' in ways that ensure that critical questions about the norms and values infecting this 'world' are not seriously addressed. (p.24)

I believe that the primary aim of education should be to produce autonomous individuals and that such autonomy and understanding will in turn *lead* to a more effective workforce, and will *lead* to good citizens as its by-products. Tarrant and Tarrant (2004) argue that educated people make better choices, including their choice of career. But they also have the added benefits of being more 'civil'; taking part in voluntary charitable activities and not becoming involved in acts of crime are two simple examples of this (pp114/5). Even if we keep within the present political parameters of improving the nation's economy, autonomy is an important facet. Whilst exploring the concept of



economy Brighouse (2000) cites two philosophers; Gutmann, who points out that in order to become a good citizen one needs to be able to reflect, and Socrates, who simply and effectively states, “unexamined life is not worth living” (p.67). Brighouse’s ideas run parallel to Rudduck *et al*’s (1996), in that he also stresses that the need to be able to recognise a ‘good life’, is more necessary in today’s material driven society than ever before. I believe that education’s primary aim should be to equip each child with the means necessary to evaluate and to choose what they deem to be ‘a good life’. But how can we possibly create a generation of thoughtful and rational beings if we do no more than force-feed them information, a large part of which will never have any relevance to their lives outside school? Helsby (1999) spoke to teachers who said that:

The National Curriculum has made us more concerned with students demonstrating knowledge rather than skills...National Curriculum is resulting in a return to rote learning and a move away from exploration and ‘real learning’. It is impossible to believe that those responsible for the changes know anything at all about children from ordinary homes or the kinds of schools which they attend...We do need to equip them for life and not have so much Shakespeare and Dickens, the balance is all wrong...  
(pp 77-79)

Helsby’s conversations with teachers, reveal a curriculum in which there is no space to ‘answer the interesting questions’ because too much information needs to be covered. One teacher said, “In English, we used to talk about anything and everything”, but she felt that there was no longer space for such conversations, “because of all the things you have to do and tick off” (Helsby, 1999, p.79). The National Curriculum in Britain assumes that it is most important that children learn subjects, and not that they develop independent skills and qualities. It does not set “more nebulous attributes” as a priority (Paechter, 1999). Although school ethos has been raised in status through the Specialist Schools initiative, the emphasis remains on achieving statistical results in prescribed subject areas. Glen, in James (2004), lamented the demise of the

teacher's role from "a profession that undertook an interesting range of responsibilities in organisations that were intriguingly heterodox and comprehensive" to that of a "warehouse operative" (p.12). The uncommunicative teenager is parodied as something of a joke, but it is very difficult for youngsters to learn the art of communication when education is no longer a system of exploration and exchange, but simply a one-sided process of rationing out information in time-allotted slots. Rudduck *et al* (1996) commented that children find it extremely hard to express themselves as they are too used to adults taking responsibility for what they have to say (p.8). The present curriculum does not allow the time for students to formulate and present ideas of their own, to reflect. Ball (2006) states that, "Ethical reflection is rendered obsolete in the process for goal attainment, performance improvement and budget maximisations" (p.11). He also adds, rather tongue in cheek, that "Value replaces values, except where it can be shown that values add value" (p.11). In other words, if being an 'ethically reflective' school boosts the grades, then perhaps it's worth giving it a try.

### ***How can we develop autonomy?***

Children should not be expected to accept things blindly, they need to learn to think, reason and act for themselves. They will not always be within a structured environment and they need to be able to make important decisions for themselves within the unpredictable environment of our modern world. Only when an autonomous desire for learning is developed will the Government's ideals for Lifelong Learning really take shape. As contemporary theorists of learning discuss, learning is far more than the results that we see in terms of qualifications, yet "students are intent on increasing their credentials rather than

their understanding” (Coffield, 2000, p.5). Young (2000) stresses that real learning is life changing:

In learning, people discover that they can act in (and on) the world in new ways. If people are learning, workplaces, families and communities must be learning and therefore changing. Measures such as the numbers of qualifications gained or numbers of learners registered on part-time courses say very little about learning as it is increasingly understood by research. (p.101)

The Oxford Dictionary (Pearsall, 2001, p.58) describes autonomy as “freedom of action” but within the context of education I believe that it means far more. Children should be taught how to evaluate evidence and make sound judgements. They should be encouraged to consider such things as the consequences of one’s actions. There would be no point in having the freedom to act in whatever way one chooses, if one did not know how to make an informed choice. When Walton (2000, p.60) listed seven reasons for youngsters opting out of education he found that four of them could be potentially ‘solved’ through the development of an autonomous understanding. For example, if students came to understand why education was important to them as an individual, they would be more willing to take part in it. But with the sheer volume of knowledge that teachers must instil into our youth today, as Helsby (1999) discovered, there is little room for the development of such skills. In fact, as Rudduck (1996) points out, these skills are more likely to be developed *outside* rather than *inside* school:

...the structures of secondary schooling offer, on the whole, less responsibility and autonomy than many young people are accustomed to in their lives outside school, and less opportunity for learning-related tensions to be opened up and explored. (Rudduck, 1996, 172)

Brighouse (2000) argues that space must be made within the curriculum for modes of reflection if we are going to provide children with the capacity for choosing a good life. As such he stresses that his aim is to offer an ‘autonomy-facilitating’ rather than ‘autonomy-promoting’ education (p.80). In order for such

reflective skills to be developed in our children, Brighouse suggests that alongside the traditional curriculum children need to discuss: how to evaluate evidence; a range of multi-ethical views; and how secular and religious thinkers have dealt with moral and religious conflict (pgs.74/5).

The concept of a broader, autonomy promoting education was broached in the Green Paper<sup>20</sup> *The Learning Age* (DfES, 1998). This paper took a more holistic approach to education, stressing that our aim should be to develop a “culture of learning” because this would “help to build a united society, assist in the creation of personal independence, and encourage our creativity and innovation” (p.10). Central to this discussion was the concept of continuous learning rather than formal education. Unfortunately these ideas had no place within the Government’s current political and ideological agenda and were never pursued. Instead the Government returned to the safer ground of statistics, with the uptake on post-compulsory education courses becoming the focus within the ‘learning culture’ arena. Serious consideration must be given to the place of autonomy in our education.

### ***Education for All?***

Gale and Densmore (2000) comment on the reality of how ‘success’ is treated within schools in the present day:

If talent and effort are truly the criteria upon which individuals succeed, then we should expect to find ‘success’ evenly distributed across social groups and the rewards of talent and effort redistributed (through schooling) with every new generation (Conant, 1940, p.598). The reality is very different...Contrary to popular belief, talent and effort are not always fairly rewarded in schools and in society generally.

(Gale and Densmore, 2000, p.16)

Traditionally the concept of five ‘good passes’ (grade C or above) at GCSE has been used as the benchmark between success and failure. It is this

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<sup>20</sup> This was originally intended as a White Paper but was significantly ‘downgraded’ (Parry and Fry, 1999).

marker that is used repeatedly to indicate the quality of an education in England (Yeomans, Higham and Sharp, 2000, DfES, 2001, Jesson and Taylor, 2002). Statistics across research vary, but a constant is that children from more affluent homes will consistently gain two or three times more qualifications than those from more underprivileged families<sup>21</sup>. Evidence suggests that inequalities in attainment between social classes have widened since the late 1980's (McDonald, 2003, p.179). There is also the disconcerting fact that 10% of school leavers do not achieve any qualifications at all (Walton, 2000, p.61). For some the prescribed courses offered by the National Curriculum hold no interest and there are no alternative avenues for developing their individual strengths. This then develops an 'us versus them' situation where teenagers are simply being contained within schools. Whilst for some the structure of education in England provides convenient stepping-stones to higher levels of certification, to others it remains a swamp offering no means to progress.

The current educational system in England does not provide equal opportunities for all students, it is unjust; but what, would I argue, constitutes a 'good education', an education that reflects ideals of social justice? Before we can vouch for educational equality we must define what we mean by this elusive term. This is no easy task as it is very difficult to define the parameters. For some, equality of education refers to inputs, in terms of teacher time and resources, and for others it refers to outputs, in terms of the education that the child leaves school with. Both definitions are problematic. As Brighouse (2000) explores, equality of inputs is insufficient, because there are those in a far more

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<sup>21</sup> Harris and Ranson (2005) give the figures of 32% of 'working class' and 81% of children from more advantaged homes leaving school with five good GCSE's (p.574/5).

advantageous position to make the most of those inputs than others.<sup>22</sup> Aspects such as parental support and the intelligence of the child will have a considerable affect on the resulting education. Equality of output is even more problematic than equality of provision, as the quality of the education produced does not necessarily reflect the quality of the inputs. Cooper (1975) comments that:

Nor is the quality of an education ever measured solely by reference to its products. It is not necessary that high-grade products emerge from a high quality education. A remedial school may be a very good one despite the fact that its products are well below the population's average. Nor is it sufficient for high quality that the students leaving the school are well-educated. They might have been well-educated before they went there. (p.115)

But Brighouse (2000) suggests that although equality of input will not produce equal effects for all, it “is something that the government may and can aim at” (p.120). And of course ‘equal’ does not mean ‘the same’. Equal time and effort may be employed in supporting a child with basic literacy or a child needing scope to improve musical talent. All children have different needs, and all should expect equal opportunity to have those needs met. Riley (1994) argues that “Resolving such equality issues is a route to quality” (p.3).

Gale and Densmore (2000), in their exploration of schooling, base their three theories of social justice on arguments first developed by Plato and Aristotle. They define three versions of justice: distributive, retributive and recognitive. Distributive social justice is based on the arguments of Rawls (1971) who feels that all should be treated as equal. Rawls chooses to ignore the influence of class and other social determinants and instead argues that if all are given equal opportunity then all will have equal prospects of success. Retributive social justice is concerned primarily with fairness in competition for

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<sup>22</sup> Again, the problem of SEN is hugely important here as issues of funding take on a whole new dimension. For that reason I speak once more, inadequately I realise, of the ‘average child’.

goods - and with punishment for those who infringe on the rights and freedoms of others (pp.14/15). Recognitive social justice requires that we acknowledge the influences and barriers of membership of different social groups. Gale and Densmore (2000) stress that access to something does not necessarily result in equality (p.23) and that we need to rethink the place of social groups within education. They call for the voices of those marginalized social groups to be heard in decisions that are made that directly concern them, and that they be represented on determining bodies (p.19). This would mean taking the time to listen to those whom education is failing. Rudduck (1996) stresses that:

...the voices of *all* pupils should be listened to and not just those who are more academically and socially confident, for it is the less effective learners who are most likely to be able to explore aspects of the system that constrain commitment and progress; these are the voices least likely to be heard and yet most important to be heard. (p.177)

It is foolish for policies to be continually developed providing for the needs of underachievers, without us asking *them* what they would like to achieve and how schools might go about it. Autonomy requires that you be involved in, and take control of, your own development.

The recognitive view of social justice is one step up from the simplest equality of provision and comes closest to the type of influence that I would like to see within schools. A distributive view of education is a good place to start, but then we need to expand that, to listen to those whom a system of equal distribution fails and find out why. As Gale and Densmore (2000) suggest, it is the groups that are currently benefiting least from our system that need to begin to have a say in the creation of their own education. It is the plight of those students that are least well provided for, (and we must remember, that in terms of achieving prescribed grades, this amounts to almost half of our youngsters) that we are least likely to be made aware of. It is those for whom the system

does not work that are, effectively, silenced. Their failure within the system leaves them with no format within which they are able to gain a voice.

What are the failing children's needs and how can we provide them with the resources necessary to achieve what *they* believe to be 'success'<sup>23</sup>? Connell's ideas (1993) are very similar to those of Gale and Densmore (2000). Connell names his theory one of 'curricular justice'. This paradigm would insist that we look at and plan our curriculum from the interests of the *least* advantaged. We are always aware of the views of the privileged, for example in choices made of literary canon, but we need to involve the least favoured in society in choices that are made about their own education. Connell (1993) stresses that this should not result in sidelined 'curriculum ghettos', where minority provisions are made for the 'others', but would involve us completely reconstructing the mainstream (pp.43/44). This may be a little extreme, as the 'mainstream' currently works for many students, but ideally new approaches could be made to more applicable curriculum areas, perhaps, for example, employing more manual skills that had a clear purpose relating to life beyond school. These new areas should then have their own valid certification. The challenge would be ensuring that these did not become inferior subjects, in the way that many vocational qualifications are deemed to be substandard, but that they should receive equal recognition alongside existing qualifications. Qualifications have a specific purpose, whether they take the student on to university or whether they take the student into the realms of industry. Any one should not be deemed of more worth than any other.

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<sup>23</sup> It is very important that we move away from the traditional views of academic success and towards a system which encourages progress in other areas more relevant to the lifestyles of those for whom our educational system has traditionally offered very little.



## ***Assessment and Accountability in Education***

One mainstay of our educational system at present, that serves to ostracize a large percentage of students, is assessment. As a measure of accountability it has permeated the entire educational infrastructure in England. Excessive assessment causes our current educational system to be based on a very narrow system of prerogatives that ensure that only a select few pupils will ever reach the pinnacles of success. Certification, Broadfoot (1979) suggests, takes on the role of 'gatekeeper', where doors are opened or closed to future life-chances (p.21). Some children will never be able to achieve that magical grade C at GCSE, and are destined to always remain an 'underachiever', as Rudduck (1996) describes:

Though GCSE is supposedly appropriate for all levels of achievement, the 'Grade C cliff' still exists...If you reach the top of the cliff then a whole new landscape opens up to you...Less than a grade C and you are at the bottom of the cliff and must start to climb again. (Rudduck, 1996, 165)

What is so frustrating, whilst we watch the same children being failed by this system again and again, is that the hurdle is never lowered or changed. The child is made to face a task that they know that they will fail repeatedly through re-sits. In day-to-day teaching a competent teacher would lower the hurdle if it was set too high, thus providing a building block for improvement, or alter the task. Or, if the child is not able to succeed at the hurdles, then perhaps they should try the long jump instead, because all practitioners know how vital a child's self-concept is. It is unfortunate that the flexibility and sound judgement that is used in every day teaching is ignored when we come to assessing children's ability. Many children are being placed in a position where they cannot possibly succeed.

In 2002 the DfES claimed that its aim was to enable all to fulfil their true potential by creating opportunities and removing barriers (2002a, p.2), but we have yet to see evidence of this. The new Baccalaureate, which aims to produce parity of esteem between vocational and academic training, has so far received a very mixed response. Though credit has been given for its emphasis on personal challenge and basic skills, it is likely that the reticence of industry to accept the new qualification will seriously hinder its development<sup>24</sup>. Articles like those in the TES, hint at the fear of change that impairs many developments that would benefit the least able ([www.tes.co.uk](http://www.tes.co.uk), 02/02/2004, 27/02/2004). In addition, it seems that even if this diploma is implemented, it will not escape the 'curse of the C grade'. It is proposed that a grade C in maths will be needed for students to gain the benchmark intermediate diploma at GCSE level (Mansell, [www.tes.co.uk](http://www.tes.co.uk), 27/02/2004).

Assessment, like competition, is great for those who repeatedly come out on top, but crippling for those who never get to experience the heights of success. Connell (1993) states that assessment regimes in deprived areas result in "chronic failure, disaffection from schooling, and self-blame" (p.78). And, of course, this is not restricted to the students; our government also puts struggling schools and hence, their staff, through ritualistic humiliation. Booth (2000) comments that, "we have a policy of 'naming and shaming' failing schools and teachers ... that rivals the excesses of the Chinese Cultural Revolution" (p.79). As with so much of our educational policy, assessment simply offers more reward to the already privileged. This can be seen whole

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<sup>24</sup> "CBI director Digby Jones said a consultation with employers all over England showed firms did not believe scrapping existing qualifications was a way to boost skills and employability" from 'Replacing GCSEs and A-levels would be damaging, says CBI' accessed [www.tes.co.uk](http://www.tes.co.uk), 22/3/04.

school, for example in the proffering of additional monies to those schools already doing comparatively well, or individually. For those students who are struggling, certification (or lack of it) does no more than close off future options.

Broadfoot (1979) comments:

The extreme importance of certification as an influence both on educational practice and the wider society emerges from this 'gate-keeper' role, by which it can open and close doors for individuals to future life chances. (p.21)

In some areas alternative methods of assessment have been explored. In Australia some schools have pushed towards “non-competitive individual descriptive assessment” (Connell, 1993, p.79). It is similar to schemes explored by the Inner London Education Authority, before its disbandment. This qualitative method of assessment results in a credential rather than a stark grade. This credential consists of a dossier, the content being negotiated between pupil and teachers. This dossier “presents a cumulative sampling and appraisal of the pupil’s work” (p80). Unfortunately the results of widening the descriptive element of assessment, inevitably led to work overload for the teachers.

At a whole-school level, Goldstein (2001) informs us that in Hampshire there is a value-added scheme where as much information as possible is given about the progress of the pupils, adjusting for prior achievement and variants, but the results are private. The schools see their own results in comparison with others, but the other schools are not named. The results are purely for the schools’ own improvement and involve no public comparisons, or humiliations (p.339/40). Goldstein adds that: “It is intended that the non-public nature of the information will encourage honest attempts to understand and improve” (p.440). Surely this is a far healthier way to approach comparison between schools? But if the Government is in any way serious about the type of inclusion that

ensures all an equal chance of 'success', even though that success may manifest itself in very different ways for different students and different schools, barriers really must be removed (DfES, 2002b, p.6). Children should be provided with opportunities to develop their individual talents in appropriate ways, and be recognised for their achievements. Until the Government is able to admit that our current system, as it stands, is failing a large portion of our students, and until they will acknowledge the segregation that exists within that system, no true progress can be made.

### ***Greater Diversity, Greater Equality?***

The past 25 years have seen an accelerating erosion of the comprehensive 'ideal' in England and Wales. Parental choice has replaced centralized LEA allocation of pupils, systems for engineering a balanced social mix in school have been largely abandoned, and the introduction of 'league tables' to measure the comparative effectiveness of individual schools has led to a polarization of secondary school intakes - the very opposite of what the original comprehensive system was intended to achieve...As well as providing for selection by religious persuasion, ability, aptitude, and parental attitude to education, differentials in levels of state funding have also been introduced. (Haydn, 2004, p.417)

What was wrong with the comprehensive 'ideal'? Rather than co-existing in supportive partnerships secondary schools are now in competition with each other for funding. They are expected to *earn* "freedom and rewards" by outperforming their neighbours DfES (2002b). The educational system in England has become less equality of opportunity for all and more survival of the fittest. In keeping with the precedents of industry, if schools do well they will get more money, and if they fail they will be closed. Success is now entwined with the achievement of specialist status; other non-Specialist Schools have gradually become viewed as 'sub-standard', or 'weaker'.

The present Government has decided that whatever remains of our secondary comprehensive system, which has traditionally existed on the premise of, 'one size fits all', needs "urgent and radical reform" (DfES, 2002b,

p.9). This reform is based on greater independence for schools as they take on various identities, most predominantly that of the Specialist School. Rather ironically, New Labour claims that this increased diversity will enable our educational system to “fulfil the original comprehensive ideal - every child being of equal worth” (p.6). This seems a rather bizarre interpretation of the ‘original comprehensive ideal’, as it removes all concept of equality of opportunity and replaces it instead with difference and competition. By their nature all comprehensives offered a similar education, based on similar aims and funding; but the introduction of specialisms now means that schools are working towards different targets and have at their disposal very different levels of funding.

The rapidity with which trends change in the English educational system is startling. In 1979 Broadfoot made the comment that primary schools were now “freed from formal assessment” (p.16). One generation later, there was more formal testing in primary school than there had ever been.<sup>25</sup> Broadfoot also commented that ‘payment by results’ had become a thing of the past, unaware of the inequities in funding that would emerge from policy development over the ensuing years. In 1990 Ball made an accurate prediction of how our educational system would become industrialised. He said:

Schools are to become businesses, run and managed like businesses with a primary focus on the profit and loss account. The parents are now the customer, the pupils in effect the product. Those schools which produce shoddy goods, it is believed, will lose custom. And it would appear that in the government’s view shoddy goods mean ‘poor’ results in national tests. The introduction of national tests alongside the provisions of the education market provide parents with a simple and crude but direct form of comparison between schools.

(Ball, 1990(a), p.11)

We now have a system whereby schools are in competition for funding, and will only gain the funding if they *show a convincing upward trend in*

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<sup>25</sup> Mansell (2004) stated that “Pupils in England now sit more than 100 formal assessments, more than almost anywhere else” ([www.tes.co.uk](http://www.tes.co.uk), 3/22/2004).

*examination results* and fill in their forms more effectively than their competitors. Ball (1990a) points out that, “the key factor in establishing a market education is linking competition to reward” (p15). Competition is now firmly instilled within our educational system under the guise of school ‘autonomy’.<sup>26</sup> And schools “spend time, money and energy on impression management, marketing and promotion” (Ball, 2006, p.12) in order to ‘sell their wares’.

Where does this shift in emphasis leave teachers, especially those not trained in the new, business approach to schooling? Teaching is now based on teachers’ ‘performativity’, or, as Harris and Ranson (2005) refer to it, “the twin pillars of accountability (inspection, test scores, league tables) and standards (target setting, monitoring, raising achievement plans)” (p.573). Grace (1987) commented that the effect that legislation emerging from central government was having on teachers was a, “steady erosion of teacher’s professional autonomy, and certainly of any remaining sense of partnership in education” (p.217). Whilst disgruntled, experienced professionals opt out of the education sector, the Government appears to be contributing little effort towards retention and instead focusing money and incentives onto those newly entering the profession.<sup>27</sup> It is thought by some that the industrialising of education is to blame for the teaching exodus. Professor Smithers (2001) stated that teachers were leaving teaching to look for “A commensurate salary” if “the criteria and targets of industry were going to be applied to them” (Slater and Thornton, (2001) [www.tes.co.uk](http://www.tes.co.uk) , 23/3/04). Wilson and Corcoran (1988) highlight the

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<sup>26</sup> *Schools Achieving Success* (DfES, 2001) states “ours is a vision of a school system which values opportunity for all, and embraces diversity and autonomy as the means to achieve it” (p.6).

<sup>27</sup> It is estimated that approximately eight percent of teachers left state schools in 2002, 5 percent to move into a different profession (Harvey, 2002, [www.tes.co.uk](http://www.tes.co.uk)). The “haemorrhage of staff from schools” has caused a “crisis in teacher retention” (Slater and Thornton, 2001, [www.tes.co.uk](http://www.tes.co.uk) ).

importance of good staff and the risk that is inherent in the Government's short-sighted manner of dealing with the problem:

People are the key to successful improvement initiatives...Phrased another way, 'the search for excellence in schools is the search for excellence in people'. Good results are not attained by merely adopting new technical gimmicks or incremental curriculum reforms. (p.119)

Excellence in teaching will not be developed whilst teachers are treated as no more than facilitators of government policy.

### ***Self-perception and PE***

Although there remains debate about the actual effects, no one would suggest that sport or exercise are *bad* for children. More physical activity will not make a child's health worse. Where I believe that there is a risk, though, is in the delicate arena of self-concept. And it is in this area that the manner in which PE is presented to children becomes vital. Everybody knows somebody for whom school PE was a horrible, humiliating experience. As Biddle, Sallis and Cavill (1998) comment:

Many researchers with physical education or sport backgrounds look for the positive associations, but all of us who have worked with young people in physical activity and sport know that there is also a chance that poor experiences damage self-esteem. (p.57)

The important question is, how do those who find aspects of PE unbearably humiliating or uncomfortable, for example those with 'clumsy child syndrome', feel, when it becomes the elevated subject area at their school?

Harter (1982) viewed the assessment and enhancement of self-esteem as a critical area of education, because it is linked with striving to achieve.

Mitchell (1983) commented that, "The psychological, social, emotional and moral development of a child is not incidental to education but the foundation on which it is built" (p.49). So what effect could it have on a child's self-esteem if, being inept in one particular area they were forced to study in a school that

glorified that very area? This focus on one area is a concern for all Specialist Schools, but especially prevalent to the area of PE, where the child is on display and where the element of public judgement is far greater. When exploring teaching styles Marshall and Weinstein (1984) noted that, “social comparison is likely to produce feelings of inferiority, low aspirations, lack of motivation, interpersonal hostility, and competitiveness” (p.305). But social evaluation cannot be avoided in PE, personal failings are inevitably witnessed by others. Smith (2002) comments on what it was like to be a teenager who was hopeless at PE<sup>28</sup>:

No wonder I always hated sport...I was fantastically, record-breakingly not good at games. If there was a race to run, a ball to throw or a length to swim, I would be last, last, last. Baby, I was born to lose. Children can be so cruel, but they were nothing compared to the teachers... (p.41)

Rosenberg (1989) tells us that, “People’s behaviour is not governed exclusively by the world that exists but by the world that is perceived” (p.vii). Smith may not, literally, have always been last in his PE lessons, but that is how he perceived the situation. The perception of one’s abilities has more significance than the reality. James (1892) suggests that self-esteem relates to our expectations of ourselves, and not to what we actually achieve. The result of all of this is that many youngsters simply ‘drop out’ of those things in which they are unable to succeed, avoiding the possibility of failure (Rosenberg, 1989). Wiese-Bornstall (1997) suggests that “children and adolescents who withdraw from sport entirely tend to have lower perceptions of their sport ability than those who remain involved” (p.2). For many to drop out is the most viable option, because “With no attempt there can be no failure; with no failure, no humiliation” (James, 1892, p.187). Within the school situation this may mean a student

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<sup>28</sup> For those of us old enough to remember, PE was often referred to as ‘games’.



contributing no effort or enthusiasm to a subject in which they struggle, or even to school in general; or physically staying away, truanting. If a child experiences constant failure then they will withdraw. A significant finding was that secondary school pupils were more than twice as likely to truant from PE lessons than they were from geography, English or technology (SCAA, 1997, p.16).

Most individuals will attempt to maximise their self-esteem by avoiding those activities that make them feel bad (e.g. playing a sport 'out of your league') and sticking to those that make them feel good (e.g. a fun game with a friend). In much the same way individuals will tend to maintain friendships with those that think highly of them, and avoid those that do not (Wigfield and Karpathian, 1991). But what happens when you cannot avoid the activities that make you feel bad...when they are compulsory? Or worse still, what if exactly those activities that you find humiliating become lauded as the most worthwhile, the most praise-worthy activities within your environment?

I am concerned that the Government's prompting to elevate one skill over others, through the Specialist Schools system, will have a detrimental effect on those who struggle in that area. During adolescence youngsters have to face up to a more objective view of their strengths and weaknesses, so it is particularly important that their self-worth is protected during this time (Wigfield and Karpathian, 1991). There is more risk to self-esteem in PE than in other subject areas, because of its element of potentially humiliating display. Teachers should be very wary in the approach that they take to teaching PE, but SSCs need to take extra care in considering just how a 'sports specialism' is approached, keeping their least able children in the forefront of their considerations.

The issue that we face is that a subject specialism is intended to permeate an entire school, to become a part of its culture. It could be that the concept of a specialism effectively 'bullies' the students into believing that there is one area, more important than others, in which they must succeed. Can other areas regain equal significance when one has been picked out, suggesting its superiority? Rosenberg (1989) pointed out that no one ever lives in a total society, we only live in those segments of it that enter our experience (p.xxviii). This *should* help us in our quest to avoid those aspects that make us feel bad about ourselves, and to dwell in those areas in which we can succeed. If a child is gifted at computers but inept at sports, she/he simply 'hangs out' with those who are like minded and dismisses the value of athletic prowess, avoiding sporting activities whenever possible. This becomes more difficult when a school's very identity is enmeshed in the elevation of one particular skill. The subject specialism is expected to create a new culture; in 1996 the DfEE said that specialist subjects should become a substantial factor in the school's identity. This means that if the subject area happens to be one in which you are a 'failure' then there is no avoiding it. You do not get to 'opt out'.

What then becomes vital is how that subject area is approached. Fox and Biddle (1989) comment that "attention to the effect of curriculum content, methodology and teaching style on psychological variables becomes crucial" because they could have "negative as well as positive results" (p.36). It has been found that a task-oriented approach to PE is far more affective in terms of both raising self-esteem and encouraging life long activity. Biddle and Fox (1988) suggest that a mastery approach should be the underlying foundation of any physical development programme. If approached correctly, incentives

aimed at improving fitness can have a very positive effect, particularly on those with low self-esteem (Fox, 2000; Gruber, 1986). There is no reason why competition cannot play a part in this. But does a task-oriented approach to PE fit in with the aims of a SSC, or will the expectancy for the colleges to produce 'winners' switch the focus to more ego-oriented activities (and, perhaps, the 'bracketed morality' that sometimes accompanies them) and neglect the psychological and health needs of the majority?

"There appears to be tremendous potential to change people's views of themselves through exercise" (Fox, 2000, p.238) but these changes can be both positive and negative. The fear is that those with the greatest needs will be those most likely to be neglected, or taught PE in a manner that does not fulfil their needs. As the focus shifts, once more, to competitive sports (SCAA, 1997) it is likely to affect SSCs far more than other educational establishments, with the Government eagerly awaiting their new batch of elite performers. Again, the vital question is, which aims do SSCs choose to prioritise, youngsters with 'healthy habits' or winners?

### ***Conclusion***

There has been a considerable shift in the aims of education and schooling over recent years, and that shift has taken us towards industrial efficiency and performance indicators; and away from a holistic approach to developing individuals and preparing them for life. Parallel to that shift has been a move away from homogenous funding and towards payment by results. Our educational system has been gradually and subtly transformed into a market economy where schools vie for custom. Schools need to sell themselves effectively if they are to get the students with the ability to raise their overall

results. In addition to competition between students there is now competition between schools. And yet, having established this highly competitive marketplace, the Government then expects schools to collaborate; for non-Specialist Schools (failures) to accept help and advice from Specialist Schools (successes) as I have already discussed.

How does this shift of emphasis affect the students? We now see a situation where two different comprehensive schools in the same suburb could be receiving vastly different amounts of monetary input. For one child this will result in improved resources, more teachers and greater opportunities. Unfortunately, due to the nature of the specialist system, it is likely that the child who is not benefiting from any extra monetary input, is also at a school where achievement is lower, and where there are more problems. True to market economy, those who are successful get more, and those that are struggling are left to flounder.

The same is true of the accreditation system, which is geared towards ensuring that the academically gifted can achieve, whilst offering very few alternatives to those who are artistically, or perhaps manually inclined and less 'book-smart'. As a result, those who are unable to conform to the prescribed system are left feeling failures, when, in truth, it is their education that has failed to provide rewards for them. If more effort were employed in developing autonomous understanding in students, they would be better able to assess their strengths and weaknesses and choose options that suited their skills. If, of course, those options are open. The Government is looking towards broadening the options in secondary education and introducing more vocational elements, but, rather surprisingly, the main opponents to this are the representatives of

business and industry, who prefer the solid indicators of the current examination results. School has now become enmeshed within industry, and the influence of industry can only increase as they inject an increasing percentage of funding into the educational system.

Whilst we increasingly look to the requirements of industry, the moral dimension of education pales into insignificance. It is necessary that young people understand and question the materialistic motivators of industry and profit, and that they do not simply become facilitators of it. The Government state that:

The success of our children at school is crucial to the economic health and social cohesion of the country as well as to their own life chances and personal fulfilment.  
(DfES, 2001b, p.5)

It is difficult to overlook the fact that ‘economic health’ comes before ‘life chances and personal fulfilment’. Coffield (2007) asks why “social justice and economic prosperity” (p.7) cannot come in that order, just for once. But as the educational system continues to be transformed to conform to the needs of industry, children will be viewed less as individuals who should have every opportunity to live a good life, and more as units of production.

And as a facet of ‘improving production’ we have subject specialisms, with their clear-cut performance targets. These bring the added complication of submerging students in one subject area, which for some, may be an area of extreme weakness. What effect will that have on the self-esteem of individuals who not only *feel* failures in that area, but, with PE in particular, by the subject’s very nature, must *display* that ineptitude? I hoped that my Case Study would help me to find out.

## 2.4 School Culture

The terms ethos, spirit, climate, ambience and culture are often used interchangeably, or without appropriate definition. When the DfES (2001a, 2001b) advised that a subject specialism should change the 'ethos' of a school, I believe that they were referring to the 'feeling' of the organisation; the 'character' of the school that one experiences on visiting the establishment. Because of the emphasis that the Government has placed upon this ethereal concept, I duly began my investigation into 'ethos'; but I soon realised that I was actually searching for was 'culture'. My exploration of literature brought me to the conclusion that ethos is the *product* of the culture of the school. Deal and Peterson (1999) suggest that although the terms 'ethos' and 'climate' are commonly used, "the term *culture* provides a more accurate and intuitively appealing way to...understand...school's own unwritten rules, norms and expectations" (p.2). Culture is the basis on which the day-to-day life at the school is built.

Culture has solidity where ethos is more elusive. Culture is deeply embedded in the school's history: beliefs, values, choices made, traditions kept. The school ethos is the result of this; the ambience that is felt at a school as a result of its cultural history; past, present and ever changing. This fits well with the Oxford Dictionary definition of ethos, which states that it is, "the characteristic *spirit of a culture*, era, or community as manifested in its attitudes and aspirations" (Pearsall, 2001, p.490, *my emphasis*). Therefore the focus for this literature review is school culture as opposed to ethos; as I believe that the whole school 'ethos', that the DfES encourages schools to nurture, is, in fact, a more nebulous product of the school's culture.

## ***Definitions of Culture***

Prosser (1999) suggests that “By the early 1980’s the terms school ethos, climate, culture, atmosphere and tone were ubiquitous” (p.2). Nias (1989) laments the fact that although the usage of the term ‘school culture’ has increased, it has done so with a “wilful lack of precision” (p.143). For example, the now infamous *Fifteen Thousand Hours* by Rutter *et al* (1979), concluded that the most important factor in the success of a school was that school’s ‘ethos’. But the authors made little attempt to clarify what, exactly, the term meant, other than to align it with “the climate of the school as a whole” (p.183). I believe that Rutter *et al* (1979) were actually referring to the effects of the *cultures* of different schools; as was Donnelly (1999), when she explored models of school governance and “the ways in which organisational members express cultural, traditional and religious norms and values” or, “how things should be done around here” (p.225). Again, inappropriately I believe, Donnelly used the term ethos. Prosser (1999) presumes that the words culture and ethos *can* be used interchangeably, when he blames Rutter *et al*’s (1979) investigation for raising the status and value of school *culture*, (although ethos was the term that Rutter *et al* actually used). It is with some irony, then, that he later criticises how the use of differing terms is rarely explained in texts.

Nias (1989) argues that we need to look at the term ‘culture’ with far more precision, if it is to “serve its users with greater accuracy” (p.143). Though Nias fails to attempt such precision herself, she makes the suggestion that a database of different types of cultures in schools should be created for reference, because by doing so the ‘cultural perspective’ would be honed and we would be able to use the term with “greater precision and force” (p.143). I

would argue quite the opposite, that the previous suggestion of a clearer definition of the term would *first* be necessary. Nias appears to have created a 'chicken and egg' situation.

The most common approach to culture is to view it as a set of beliefs and unspoken rules, based on history and tradition, which affects how individuals act and interact with one another. Prosser (1999), describes it this way:

School culture is an unseen, and unobservable force behind school activities, a unifying theme that provides meaning, direction, and mobilisation for school members. It has both concrete representation in the form of artefacts and behavioural norms, and sustained implicitly by jargon, metaphors and rites.  
(p.13)

Shared meanings, "cultural understandings" (Angus, 1998) or a "set of core values" (Leader, 2004), are vital for a unifying culture. Culture can be found in the solidity of the school building and its contents, how the school is organised, the staff that it houses and how they interact, and the individual histories and personalities that they bring to the melting pot (Nias, Southworth and Yeomans, 1989). School culture is a tangible entity, whereas ethos is far more nebulous, always retaining a vagueness. Allder (1993), without recognising it as such, describes how the ethos of a school emerges from the school's culture:

...the ethos of a school... is the unique, pervasive atmosphere or mood of the organisation which is brought about by activities or behaviour, primarily in the realm of social interaction and to a lesser extent in matters to do with the environment, of members of the school, and recognised initially on an experiential rather than a cognitive level.  
(p.69)

We recognise and comprehend the school culture, whereas we experience the ethos.

Handy and Aitken (1986) investigate the school in the same way as they would investigate any other organisation. Within all establishments, they claim, there are four main types of cultural organisation, these are: **the club culture**,



which can be visualised as a spider's web. This type of culture is all built around the 'head', who is crucial, and then radiates out in concentric circles of lessening intimacy. Within such a culture a strong central personality is vital. **The role culture** is far more formal and thrives on routine. The roles can be seen as pillars needed to support the structure. Such organisations struggle to cope with change. **The task culture** can be visualised as a mesh. This culture is comprised of a group or a team of talents, who often work in 'problem solving teams'. Such an organisation usually has little bureaucracy, is friendly and forward-looking. **The person culture** can be likened to clusters of stars. The talents of the individual are of most importance here, and the organisation is a clustering of those individual talents, such as in a doctor's surgery. Managers are usually lower status than the professionals and so hold little sway over them.

The obvious reaction to the establishment of such types is 'but my school didn't fit neatly into any of those descriptors', and this is the point that Handy and Aitken (1986) stress; most organisations are actually a mixture, and the important thing is how that amalgam is managed. "What makes each organisation different is the mix they choose. What makes them successful is, often, getting the right mix at the right time" (p.91). This is why many explorations of culture devote a great deal of word space to the fundamental role of the school leader (Sarason, 1971, Nias *et al*, 1989).

Researchers such as Acker (1990), Hargreaves (1994), and Nias *et al* (1989) have investigated various school cultures as focused case studies and found many examples of 'positive cultures'. Hargreaves (1994) informs us of a school where the teachers had very positive perceptions of each other, the students and the community, where over half of the teachers were involved in

extra-curricular activities and where teachers, having experienced the school, tended not to want to leave (although in terms of professional progress this can be a negative factor). Conversation and interactions suggested a very positive culture at the school. Acker (1990) describes a school that was “more like a family than a factory” (p.263). It is assumed that such a culture is a positive thing that will pay dividends in terms of, “learning achievement, morale, personal growth and other indicators of school performance” (Deal and Kennedy, 1983).

Unfortunately such a close, informal culture, positive as it may be, will rarely be found in the secondary arena, where, due to their larger size and increased numbers of staff, schools usually need to take on a more formal role culture. Because of the increased segregation in larger establishments there is a greater possibility that culture is not universally shared. Hargreaves (1994) says:

All organizations, it is thought, have cultures. This is not a finding but a presumption. The possibility that some highly complex organizations may have no shared culture of any substance or significance is not acknowledged. (p.189)

Within an organisation of any size, even if the “herd does keep moving roughly west”, (Deal and Kennedy, 1983) it is possible to find sub and even conflicting cultures.

### ***Conflicting cultures***

Can a whole school culture exist if staff choose not to ‘buy into’ that culture? Nias *et al* (1989) used case studies to explore the staff cultures of five schools and found that “in none of the schools were staff groups homogenous or totally cohesive” (p.44). Prosser (1999) took a micro-political approach to investigating the school and found, like Deal and Kennedy (1983), that one guiding value system was not the norm in schools. A shared vision is rarely the reality. Hargreaves (1993a) argues that there is a tradition of individualism within the teacher culture that works as a heresy against collegiality. When he studied

Canadian teachers who were being encouraged to work collaboratively in 1991, he found that the results were largely negative. Collegiality was something that occurred naturally, it could not be forced. He was scathing of the bullishness of those who were manipulating their position of power in an attempt to enforce it. He said:

In micropolitical and more broadly socio-political terms, contrived collegiality is not merely an example of personal insensitivity among particular administrators. Rather it is constitutive of sociopolitical and administrative systems that are less than fully serious about their rhetorical commitment to teacher empowerment.  
(Hargreaves, 1991, p.69)

Hargreaves concluded that contrary to the claims of benefits for teachers, the rhetoric surrounding collegiality was working to help mask the widening chasm between the political claims and the reality of teacher disempowerment.

Deal and Kennedy (1983), who believe that a positive culture can have marked results when fully established, found that:

...in many schools, teachers and students do not know what is expected of them nor do they understand how their actions are related to school-wide efforts. Parents, teachers, students, administrators, and support staff often form sub-cultures around immediate, parochial interests that pull the school in several directions.  
(p.15)

It is interesting how in Deal and Kennedy's view rejections of a whole school culture are not deliberate, but arise out of a lack of communication. Nias *et al* (1989) also investigated the idea of the development of sub-groups and comment on how these could easily be perceived as cliques. They add that: "By definition, members of a clique placed greater value on their sub-group relationships than on their relationships within the wider staff group" (p.44) thus inhibiting the development of an encompassing staff culture. Other cliques became perceived as "the enemy" (ibid).

The simplest example of the sub-culture, is the subject sub-culture which often develops in secondary schools (Ball, 1987). As disputes emerge about

scarce resources, administrative and teaching styles, a larger school's fragmented organisation can sometimes result in "sabotage and outright warfare" (Deal and Peterson, 1999). The more complex the institution's structure, the greater the likelihood of, "formal powers, rules, regulations, traditions and rituals... being subverted by individuals, groups or affiliations" (Prosser, 1999, p.4). Individuals seek comfort in small group identity.

It is possible that one cause of such conflict in recent years has been the confusing role that is currently applied to teachers and schools and their transformation along the lines of industry (discussed in the previous sections). Are teachers to deem themselves producers or skilled professionals, are they working collaboratively or are they in competition? Handy and Aitken (1986) described how:

The secondary school today seems afflicted by a sort of organisational schizophrenia; is it a bureaucratic factory delivering goods or is it a collective of individual professionals each doing their own professional thing? (p.94)

Such insecurity about roles and relationships inevitably leads to tension and suspicion. Rather ironically, Hargreaves (1994) points out that during this time of "struggle between bureaucratic control and professional empowerment ...collaborative relationships and the particular forms they take are central" (p.251). But, as I have noted elsewhere, collaboration is far more difficult when individuals and schools are placed in competition with one another (Solvason, 2004a).

In addition to these prolific barriers to whole school culture, there are also more discreet forms; such as the discrepancy between the culture that a school believes it is built on, and the culture that is perceived by individual

participants.<sup>29</sup> Donnelly (2000) describes this well, although she uses the word 'ethos' where I would suggest that culture rightly belongs:

There are...some difficulties in that the ethos described formally in school documentation or defined by school authorities often departs considerably from the ethos which emerges from the intentions, interactions and behaviour of school members. (p.137)

Here, Donnelly (2000) elaborates, we are faced with the discrepancy between ethos (culture) being "a formal goal of the school or...the product of social interaction" (p.150). Both must be in agreement for a 'strong culture' to be possible.

When The Scottish Office (1998) reviewed 36 secondary schools, they found that 'teacher praise' was the lowest scoring item in their pupil questionnaire. This was particularly significant in relation to the teachers' misconceptions that their school was strong in that particular area. Whilst the teachers believed that theirs was a culture of praise, the students felt just the opposite. Lewis and Lindsay (2000) commented that it was very difficult to fully comprehend the students' perception of the experience of school, and that, "The meanings that they attach to their experiences are not necessarily the meanings that their teachers or parents would ascribe" (p.61).

Arrowsmith and Jamieson (1995) elicited pupils' responses in order to evaluate a PE department from their perspective. This was a highly effective department and the majority of results amounted to little more than a 'pat on the back' to staff. One perception that did emerge, though, was that it would be good if the teachers were "more encouraging of less able pupils" (p.7). The teachers were unaware that they were portraying a culture in which the less able

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<sup>29</sup> Prosser (1999) also discusses 'on-site perceived culture' (staff and visitors' views of the school) and 'off-site perceived culture', a view formed by parents and the local community through prospectuses, gossip and pupils' behaviour outside school, and which, obviously, could be totally inaccurate.

were not valued so highly, until the pupils gave their views. A difference in perceptions was also found in Delamont and Galton's (1986) investigation of secondary schools. This study found that some students perceived a culture of exclusion, and as a result certain pupils commented that what was supposed to be "the football club was 'really' the football team" (p.178).

Many of these ideas run parallel to the concept of the 'hidden curriculum', frequently mentioned in passing and investigated by Skelton in 1997. Skelton (1997) describes the hidden curriculum in this way:

That set of implicit messages relating to knowledge, values, norms of behaviour and attitudes that learners experience in and through educational processes. These messages may be contradictory, non-linear and punctuational and each learner mediates the message in her/his own way. (p.188)

Just like signals about the school culture, symbols and actions can also be received in many different ways, regardless of intentions.

Before moving on to attempts to 'change' culture I will first mention what Deal and Peterson (1999) refer to as 'toxic cultures', where the culture of the school has a negative effect. They describe this as when "motivation, commitment, and loyalty are destroyed across the board for students, staff parents and administrators" (p.101). Often this is a result of extensive change, failure or relentless legislation. Toxic, or negative effects, can also be more nebulous, as was found in Oakes' (1985) investigation of the persistence of inequality in school, particularly through the act of streaming. She commented that the dominance of a hierarchical structure within the school, served to "convince the disinherited that they owe their scholastic and social destiny to their lack of gifts or merits" (p.201). Deal and Peterson (1999) stress that, "Cultural patterns are highly enduring, have a powerful impact on performance, and shape the ways people think, act and feel" (p.4). If this is the case then

attempts to alter the school culture should be approached very carefully, as that 'powerful impact' has the potential to be either constructive or destructive.

### ***Re/creating Cultures***

Central to the Government's rhetoric when promoting the Specialist School, was the idea that these schools should *develop* a distinct ethos; that the culture of the school should be nurtured to reflect the school's specialism. I have already asserted that ethos is the 'feeling' that results from the school culture, and that culture is the "school's own unwritten rules and traditions, norms and expectations that seem to permeate everything" (Deal and Peterson, 1999, p.2). Cultures are deep-rooted, and plans to change a culture could be at best tricky and at worst detrimental to the fabric of the school (Solvason, 2005a, p.91).

Prosser (1999) comments that "Meaningful changes to a generic school culture are rare and difficult to achieve..." (p.8). Changing the culture of a school is not as straightforward as altering a timetable, modifying curriculum content, or changing the decor. Hargreaves (1994) stresses that:

Cultures do not operate in a vacuum. They are formed within and framed by particular structures. These structures are not neutral. They can be helpful or harmful. They can bring teachers together or keep them apart. They can facilitate opportunities for interaction and learning, or present barriers to such possibilities...The importance of restructuring may be less in terms of its direct impact on curriculum, assessment, ability grouping and the like, and the demands these place upon teachers, than in terms of how it creates improved opportunities for teachers to work together and support each other on a continuing basis.  
(p.256)

Unfortunately many of the modifications resulting from a school acquiring specialist status, for example one department suddenly having considerably more resources than another, can discourage collaboration and mutual support and instead nurture resentment. In his case studies of newly formed SSCs, Houlihan (1999) found "a sense of grievance from other departments at the flow of additional resources to physical education" (p.13). Ball (1987) suggests that,

“Innovations are rarely neutral. They tend to advance or enhance the position of certain groups and disadvantage or damage the position of others” (p.32). He adds that innovations in schools often become arenas for political conflict between opposing groups, and gives examples from his own case studies. But, as Hargreaves and Hopkins (1991) comment, “research into the effects of school development planning...is far from robust” (p.34). One must ask on what factual basis the Government is building their proposals for changing the culture of a school. Are they suggesting that new developments should be seen as superior to the beliefs, values and traditions of the school that already exist? Sarason (1971) is dubious whether new ideas, however enthusiastically presented, can really change the core values of a school.

Good ideas and missionary zeal are sometimes enough to change the thinking and actions of individuals; they are rarely, if ever, effective in changing complicated organisations (like the school) with traditions, dynamics, and goals of their own.  
(p.213)

It takes far more than a new policy to transform the underlying beliefs of a school.

An important factor in school innovation is the extent to which individuals have been involved in the decision-making. Ball (1987) discussed this, and pointed out that acceptance of ‘change’ decisions had been found to be directly related to the amount that individuals within the group had participated in that decision. Within the present educational environment, most of the crucial decisions within a school are made by the senior management and then ‘implemented’ through less senior staff. The little time that main scale teachers are required to spend in meetings over and above their teaching hours necessitates this. As a result collaboration is reduced to co-optation for many teachers, or “a commitment not to developing and realizing purposes of one’s



own but to implementing purposes devised by others” (Hargreaves, 1994, p.191). Sinkinson’s 2005 study of a school gaining specialist maths and ICT status was an example of this. As only the head of maths had release time for the specialist venture she dominated all planning and training, spending “incredibly long hours” (p.204) sharing her expertise, whilst everyone else watched. Other teachers did not feel any part of it, not even the head of the ICT department, the supposed partner in the specialism. It became a cult of personality rather than a culture, and would have no lasting effect once that key player left the school.

### ***Conclusion***

In conclusion we must return to Donnelly’s (2000) question: is culture something that is established and accepted as a goal of the school, or is it something that is produced through interactions within the school? The latter seems more acceptable. Goodlad (1975) suggests that “as... individuals...act upon or neglect cultural elements of schools, schools become places that support and mould or inhibit certain kinds of behaviour” (p.115). If newcomers reject the way that things are done, then there will be change. Written or spoken aims in any organisation become null and void if human interaction points to the contrary. A secondary school cannot make the claim of inclusivity if their pupils with special needs are not encouraged to take part in the annual school production. Though the school may claim that its culture is all embracing, the ethos that the pupils experience as a result of the actual culture may be quite the opposite. Actions reinforce and represent school cultures.

I agree with Deal and Peterson, that culture is a:

...school’s own unwritten rules and traditions, norms and expectations that seem to permeate everything: the way people act, how they dress, what they talk about or

avoid talking about, whether they seek out colleagues for help or don't, and how teachers feel about their work and their students.

(Deal and Peterson, 1999, pp.2-3)

It is such a perception of culture that framed my investigations in my Case Study. It remains problematic, as our understanding of how a school culture could, or should be, is inevitably based upon our own assumptions and experience, but what area of qualitative research is not? To attempt to reduce the study of 'culture' to statistics or formulae would be like "hunting a phoenix, born of the ashes of past school effects research" (Prosser, 1999, p.167). This particular human data cannot be reduced to numbers.

### ***Summary***

These literature reviews provide the basis for my concerns about the effects of Specialist Status on a school. They also explain my particular fears for the effects that a sporting specialism could have on certain children. In the following chapter I explore how these problems were formed into a research project and how my desire to make sure that the participants' voices were heard moulded the approach that was taken. I also debate my approach taken to subjectivity within the problematic arena of ethnomethodology.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Research Methodology

#### *Overview*

This chapter charts the destruction of my preconceptions about research and the emergence of my role as a reflexive qualitative researcher. I mention ethics, not merely in terms of a form-filling convention, but as an emotional obligation to the confidences of participants within the research. I discuss why the Case Study was chosen as the most apt research tool for gaining my data and the sources of data that were used. I then explore how the data were analysed. Within the limitations and delimitations of the study I discuss the evasive nature of qualitative data. Finally I give an overview of my struggle with access negotiations, which had a marked impact upon this research.

#### 3.1 Introduction

*The whole of science is nothing more than a refinement of everyday thinking.*

*If we knew what it was we were doing, it would not be called research, would it?*  
(Albert Einstein, [www.fys.ku.dk/~raben/einstein](http://www.fys.ku.dk/~raben/einstein), 2/08/07)

The above comment made the humiliation caused by my earliest preconceptions of research just a little more bearable. During the entirety of my second round of reading methodological texts in preparation for writing this chapter (after finishing my fieldwork), I found myself slightly cringing. My conscience was like a stuck record, 'oh why didn't I read this before I did my fieldwork...' The fact of the matter was that I *did* read the texts before I did my fieldwork...I simply could not relate to them then. This piece of research was only completed on the assumption that a PhD is like any other training process, you learn from your mistakes, because I made plenty of them. Refining everyday thinking is a more complicated process than one would think.

At the outset I must briefly discuss my style of writing. My penmanship is very honest, open and straightforward; which I would hope makes my subject matter more accessible to all. I avoid verbalism and aim for the meaning of my work to be transparent. I have previously attempted to write in a strictly scientific, depersonalised style, more 'befitting of a PhD student', but it was very like struggling to write in a straight-jacket; very uncomfortable and entirely unnatural. I am re-counting a personal experience and the voice needs to be my own. I also believe that in making my recount transparent, I add more credence to the validity of my work. The pollution of my own life story within the story of the school is clear; to attempt to cover it up would be less than honest.

Silverman (2000) stresses that it is most productive to liken a PhD to an apprenticeship; training undertaken to earn admission to a community of scholars (p.20). I do now feel that having undergone the 'initiation' of research, I truly know the secrets of 'doing a research project'. It's a bit like giving birth, no one can ever prepare you for it, and until you've been through the full horror of it yourself, you cannot really communicate effectively on the topic with those who have shared the experience. There is that hidden knowledge that cannot be assimilated through academic reasoning, it only becomes whole on physically encountering it. Once you have made the great discovery, your former naivety in presuming to know what 'research is' becomes an embarrassment.

When I embarked on my research I hoped to stride into the school and collect groundbreaking data. In reality numerous hurdles conspired to prevent that, and I had to hold firm to the belief that a PhD was predominantly the process, not the results. Phillips and Pugh (1994) rationalise it this way:

You are not doing research in order to do research; you are doing research in order to demonstrate that you have learned *how* to do research to fully professional standards. (p.20)

And, of course, the best way of learning is through your mistakes. My data may not be quite what I had fancifully hoped it would be at the outset of my study, but the richness of knowledge gained through the experience is far greater than I would have imagined. There are so many things that I know now that I simply *could not* have known before going through the research process. I am deeply shamed by my naïvety when I first walked into my study school, but in many ways my naïvety was fortunate; if I knew then what I know now, I would not have been brave enough to attempt my piece of research. It is that simple. Ignorance is bliss.

### **3.2 Epistemology**

My understanding of 'how we know things' has changed beyond measure during this research. Before beginning my research I was of the positivist assumption that there were facts out there to be discovered; a few observations, interviews and questionnaires and I would be able to present a clear picture of what made my study school tick. The reality was far more messy, and slightly terrifying. If there were facts out there just waiting to be unearthed, then how could two participants have completely different views on them? How could some members of staff use the descriptions of 'friendly', 'welcoming' and 'pleasant atmosphere' to depict the school, when others chose 'untidy', 'poor pupil behaviour' and 'frantic atmosphere'? Could this be the same school? And where did my views come into it? Whereas at one time the researcher could have claimed authority in presenting the 'truth', such positivist traditions have now been challenged. "The age of a putative value-free social science appears to be over" (Denzin, 1994, p.501). I came to realise that, if anything, my voice held less value than the participants, because I had not lived the experience.

Having progressed beyond the fantasy of my authoritative voice, then, my aim became largely ethnomethodological; I needed to discover and present the inhabitants' views of *their* social culture. Alongside this would sit my observations of the local infrastructure and none would take precedence. It would involve both large and small-scale data (for the overview and the minutiae) and would benefit from both qualitative and some quantitative methods.

### **3.3 Methodology**

As long as research is practiced there will always be a chasm between the extreme followers of qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative studies reject the positivist laws of controlled scientific experiments, where results are open to testing, in favour of studying the world and its inhabitants in its 'natural' state. Qualitative research is often seen as the 'poor relation' to its quantitative cousin or a 'second class method' (Silverman 2000, 2001), mainly due to its emergence from within the shadows of strict scientific paradigms. Having opted for a methodology that combines some elements of both paradigms, I gave little credence to the supposed dichotomy, until handing some of my work to a 'scientist' to read. He said, quite simply, that he couldn't do it. He had managed a page and a half of my thirty page section and had scrawled 'de-personalise' and 'based on what fact?' repeatedly over my work. It made me realise that there are, as Stenhouse (1979) suggested, those that regard 'science' and 'discipline' as words of approbation rather than description (p.5). Though there are always extremes, generally the lines are more blurred; and most researchers would acknowledge that both methodologies have their strengths and their limitations.

There does now exist a wealth of knowledge that has emerged through the qualitative research tradition. Unfortunately, what is unhelpful to fledgling qualitative researchers is, that there is no foolproof paradigm of empirical research. As anthropological research deals with the complexity of lived experiences, rather than replicable experiments and statistics, each and every case is entirely different. Fleming (1997) comments that the “different forms of human interaction and the complexity of social relations mean that it is impossible to be prescriptive” (p.146). We can never use the phrase ‘all things being equal’ because they never are (Stenhouse, 1979, p.5). And just as the case is different, the individual response of the researcher is also different. Atkinson and Hammersley (1994) suggest, “there is no perfectly transparent or neutral way to represent the natural or social world” (p.254). Or, in Denzin’s words, ‘the age of “objective” description is over’ (1994, p.505). Because of this, theories and methodologies to guide qualitative research remain elusive. In reading qualitative research texts I always had the feeling that I’d missed something. I searched in vain for the strong examples of qualitative research methodologies that a paper had promised; for something that I could take away and apply, but I could never find them. The methodology was inevitably tangled up in that particular case. We are told that:

...sociologists have come to grips with the reflexive, problematic, and, at times, contradictory nature of data and with the tremendous, if unspoken, influence of the researcher as author. (Fontana and Frey, 1994, p.372)

But we are not told *how*. This is because each problem and solution in field research is a new one; we learn interpretation only through doing (Denzin, 1994, p.502).

In keeping with the respected tradition of labelling, then, the 'Case Study' was chosen as my method of research, and I utilised both qualitative and quantitative tools in my attempt to assimilate a representative 'whole'. I believe that to stick to a rigid theory or methodological paradigm is suffocating and offers nothing to the exploration of a phenomenon. Unlike other, more 'pure' methodologies, a Case Study chooses its focus and then uses data collection methods that are appropriate. A Case Study does not place itself on one side or the other of the qualitative/ quantitative divide; rather than committing oneself to a particular paradigm, collection methods depend on the nature of what is being described (Silverman, 2000). Stake (1994) puts it very succinctly when he comments: "Case Study is not a methodological choice, but a choice of object to be studied" (1994, p.236). Though this may give rise to criticism of a lack of structure, I would argue that when dealing with complex individuals and establishments, flexibility is the most important element (Silverman, 2001, p.26).

This particular Case Study represents a pursuit of knowledge where I believed there to be a void. Yes, it has wider implications, I do believe that changes need to be made to current educational policy; and my beliefs have recently been verified by the news of a shocking rise in failing schools (TES, 16/01/04). The further that I delved into the body of literature exploring the Specialist Schools phenomenon, the more concerned I became that the Specialist College concept does not support the ideals of social justice; or offer anything in the way of equality. But these are not the primary objectives of my study. This study explores the micro effects on the staff and pupils of *one school* of the macro policy that promotes specialist status. I am not naïve enough to believe that my recount will bring about any change in that policy, but I do hope



that it will provoke thought and either start, or add to, a growing number of similar studies in the field. This Case Study aims to paint a picture of the lived experience of staff and students in a school becoming a specialist college. We have seen numerous number-filled tables reporting how specialisms influence examination grades, but “there are areas of social reality which such statistics cannot measure” (Silverman, 2001, p.32). Though I do not avoid the use of charts and figures, I combine them with voices and influences and the basic social processes behind them. Ultimately the aim of my research is to give a voice to the people that policy affects.

### ***The Case Study***

As Stake effectively interprets it, a Case Study is concentrating on the ‘one among others’ (1994, p.236). The case is specific and bounded. That there are clear boundaries is important, because “the boundedness and the behaviour patterns of the system are key factors in understanding the case” (1994, p.236). Atkinson and Delamont (1985) gave no credence to Stake’s definition of the case, denouncing it as “so general and vague as to be of next to no methodological value” (p.29). Unfortunately they offer no useful alternative. When giving an overview of the Case Study one cannot be anything other than vague, just as when guidelines are given for carrying out qualitative research, as each Case Study is unique. The only thing that all Case Studies have in common is that they are an intense, in-depth study. As Stake (1994) stresses, Case Study work is reflective, it takes “substantial time on site...reflecting, revising meanings of what is going on” (242). The value of a Case Study lies in the researcher’s submergence in the data. Unfortunately Atkinson and Delamont (1985) fail to discuss this in their scathing criticism that takes a *seven day* Case

Study of a school as a 'typical' example. My time in the field comprised of three months during which informal visits were made and no formal notes taken. After this regular visits of a day a week were made for six months, then followed five months of intense visits, when I was at the school most days. Finally I visited just once a month for three months before stopping visits altogether. In all I made approximately eighty visits to the school, but even then I felt that there were still areas of experience at the school that remained untapped; I had just scraped the surface. A seven-day Case Study could only show the briefest of snap shots.

Atkinson and Delamont (1985) seem somewhat confused again when they quote Hamilton (1980) in his belief that Case Studies are not generalisable, then later negate this by stating that to deem Case Studies non-generalisable is not *usually* the case. The generalisability of a Case Study is open for debate. Though researchers are urged to show caution in formulating generalisations (Stake, 1995, p.12), it is often a feature of the Case Study that the 'one' is a typical example representative of 'the many'. As Cohen and Manion describe it:

The Case Study researcher typically observes the characteristics of an individual unit...The purpose of such observation is to probe deeply and to analyse intensively the multifarious phenomena that constitute the life cycle of the unit with a view to establishing generalisations about the wider population to which that unit belongs. (Cohen and Manion, 1989, pp124-125)

Case Studies like Ball's Beachside Comprehensive (1981), based on hundreds of days of full immersion in the field, provide an in-depth analysis of one particular case, under the assumption that this case will be indicative of the wider picture. By studying one comprehensive Ball provides an indication of what many comprehensives *could* be like. His study absorbed him in the particularities of one school, but his aim was to affect much wider policy. He said:

I hope to demonstrate here that much of the political and educational rhetoric which surrounds the notion of comprehensives in this country ignores, or is irrelevant to, what actually goes on in schools. (Ball, 1981, p.1)

Although all schools are different, it is highly likely that at least some aspects of behaviour in one will be duplicated in other, similar schools. If the Specialist Schools policy is producing a particular effect in one school, it is unlikely to be the only one.

The problem that Atkinson and Delamont (1985) raise is that the depth of detail recorded by case studies dooms them to remain “isolated one-off affairs” (p.39). This is a problem, but I disagree with their suggestion to resort to a more quantitative investigation in order to tackle it. Their idea is that cases would be improved by more comparison with similar institutions, looking ‘in *formal* terms’ at ‘common features’ (p.40). They are implying that the complexity of human life and interaction can be measured by formalised theories. Blau and Schoenherr attempted this in 1971 and found that it did not work. In attempting to use ‘purely statistical logic’ in the place of ‘common sense understanding’ when looking at the organisation and hierarchy of jobs, they found that they repeatedly needed to return to common sense knowledge in order to solve the many problems of idiosyncrasy that emerged within the different organisations. Who is to judge whether statistical formulae have more value than minutiae and depth? I agree with Hammersley (1992) who proposes that, “the retreat into paradigms effectively stultifies debate and hampers progress” (p.182).

Stenhouse (1978, 1979) brings a more balanced approach to the argument by suggesting that what we really need is a history of Case Studies plural. From this we will then be able to create more valid generalisations. The depth of the Case Study is needed in order for us to thoroughly investigate our educational system, but an individual case does not represent the class ‘school’. Therefore,

Stenhouse (1978) suggests that we create a “critical and analytic contemporary history of education fed by recent, current and future Case Study” (p.22). This, he argues, *would* have the potential to profoundly influence our educational policy and practice. This concept would work in the same vein as historical analysis, whereby instances gain validity and probability in an accumulation of evidence. An isolated Case Study provides the reader with “sufficient descriptive narrative” for them to “vicariously experience these happenings, and draw their own conclusions” (Stake, 1994, p.243), but with a bank, or a significant sample of Case Studies the validity of issues are strengthened. Of course, there will always be exceptions, but as this ‘bank of evidence’ approach is one which has underpinned the whole of our nation’s recorded history (not to mention world history), it is one that many individuals put their trust in. We make decisions on the accumulation of evidence. This research aims to provoke thought and to highlight the need for further, similar study.

Janesick (1994) concisely sets out the parameters of anthropology and in doing so outlines my primary intentions as I approached my Case Study:

1. Look for the meaning and perspectives of the participants in the study.
2. Look for relationships regarding the structure, occurrence, and distribution of events over time.
3. Look for points of tension: What does not fit? What are the conflicting points of evidence in the case? (Janesick, 1994, p.213)

### ***Ethnomethodology***

Ethnomethodology slightly alters the usual intentions of the Case Study, as its aim is not just to represent the researcher’s views, but to elicit the views of the participants. It was very important for this study that I log not just my own version of how the change in status had affected the study school, but that I strive to discover the opinions of those whom it actually affected directly. I aim to research ‘with’ as apposed to ‘on’ (Morris in James, 2004, p.vii).

I have used statistics in order to place Specialist Schools contextually, and in order to give overviews of opinions, but the depth of my research comes from the voices of the participants, as it is these that are commonly neglected. My research attempts to present “the members’ perspectives on the social reality of the observed setting” (Altheide & Johnson, 1994, p.490). It relies not only on the researcher’s definitions but seeks to discover the ways in which others define their situation. Of course these definitions will differ, and my research attempts to honestly reflect this multivocality. Inevitably this creates even more difficulties than those created by the ‘standard’ Case Study. I not only have to deal with my own subjectivity and biases, but others, too. Charmaz and Mitchell (2001) define it this way:

Researchers and subjects hold worldviews, possess stocks of knowledge, and pursue purposes that influence their respective views and actions in the presence of the other. (p.162)

Not only are there inevitable difficulties in reaching what participants *really* think, if they are aware of it themselves, but also there are the insurmountable difficulties caused by the researcher’s presence influencing the situation. Hollway and Jefferson (2000) comment that it would be foolish to accept individual “accounts as unproblematic” as this is contrary to the experience that we already have of “people’s less clear-cut, more confused and contradictory relationship to knowing and telling about themselves” (p.3). They add that, “resulting narratives are always a product of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee” (p.45). Into this already baffling medley are added the issues of access, ethics and trust. Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford (1997) suggest that it is healthier to simply accept ourselves as players in the drama that we are researching, rather than constantly worrying that we are

'infecting it' (p.241). It is a conundrum, but one that reflexivity goes some way towards solving.

Reflexivity, which means to 'refer back', is vitally important in post-modern studies that cannot rely on existing, tried and tested formula. Post-modern views of research accept the presence of the researcher and all of the emotional and experiential 'baggage' that that researcher brings. I do not believe it possible to 'bracket out' elements of oneself that may affect the research, in an Husserlian manner (Cutcliffe and McKenna, 1999, p.377), so it is vital that the researcher is reflexive. This is different to mere reflection, which a researcher would do as a matter of course throughout their study, instead it refers to placing new observations within the wider scope of knowledge that we have already gained of the situation and its history. Our new understandings are dependant on the understandings that have already been formed (Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford, 1997, p.237).

Perhaps the most important element of the argument supporting ethnography is that it does not claim to deal with objective truth. Central to the premise of ethnography is the process. Ethnographers do not simply make claims, instead they strive to produce texts which "explicate *how* we claim to know *what* we know" (p.496). The 'results' and the process are inextricably linked, therefore the researcher and the results are also inextricably linked.

### **3.4 The role of the researcher**

Under the remit of divine orthodoxy, the social scientist is transformed into philosopher-king (or queen) who can always see through people's claims and know better than they do. (Silverman, 2000, p.198)

I must confess that on beginning this research I was an unwitting follower of what Silverman (2000) refers to as the 'divine orthodoxy' of the researcher. I

thought that I would be able to take individuals' comments and from within them discover the 'truth' of what they really felt, believed, thought. I presumed that as a researcher I would feel in a position of power; it all sounded very glamorous, but in reality I found my new role humiliating. Rather than the confident researcher that I had hoped to be, I felt de-powered; it was a very degrading experience. From the security of knowing that I was a highly proficient teacher I became a clumsy novice researcher. I had no role that provided me with any value at the school, on the contrary, rather than feeling indispensable, as I was in my last role as class teacher in a school with many discipline problems, I felt uncomfortably aware that I had no use to the school and was simply a nuisance. Rather than having my classroom, my domain, I was constantly concerned that I was 'sat in somebody else's chair' in the staffroom. I had nowhere to go. Even if I escaped to my car I would be observed, and look a little pathetic into the bargain. My insecurity became acute as I attempted to elicit information whilst causing the minimum amount of disruption. Johnson (1976), describes the feeling perfectly:

Trying to be busy without hassling any one worker too much is like playing Chinese checkers, hopping to and fro, from here to there, with no place to hide.  
(cited in Hammersley and Atkinson, 1993, p.100)

Added to this was the awareness that there were teachers in the field who were willing me to fail, because of the mistaken notion that as a PhD researcher I must have felt that I was superior to them, an expert. Anthropological field research seems to demand the contradictory qualities of refined sensitivity and a very thick skin, and I certainly lacked the latter. 'Establishing relationships in the field' is often approached as if it were something as straightforward as doing a literature review, but emotional involvement and trust carry with them far more weight than a simple paper exercise. Bar-on (1991) comments that research

inevitably forces us to look inside ourselves, and we inevitably discover that, “Emotion is not a side effect or a pathological consequence of engaging in research; it is central to the project” (p.7).

Delamont (1992) gave an account of access negotiations and becoming ‘accepted’. Her words were “...to be blunt: write it all down, it is all part of the data” (p95). This reminds me very much of the repeated implorations to write that my Director of Studies answered my questions with, whilst I whined about the problems that I faced in the field. I found it infuriating; I was crashing against numerous hurdles and no one seemed to want to help me over them. I was obviously getting it ‘wrong’ and no one was telling me how to get it ‘right’. I now realise that no one can be an expert on another’s situation. Fieldwork is so horribly personal and private. Only the researcher knows the situation entirely, and so only the researcher can make important decisions about how to deal with it, right or wrong.

My primary role was observer, but it was not uncommon for me to get involved in events, simply to retain my sanity. Atkinson and Hammersley (1993) comment that in a way “all social research is a form of participant observation, because we cannot study the social world without being part of it” (p.249). I had tried to enter the school looking smart and professional, so that the teaching staff would accept me as an equal, but it was made clear to me very early on that this was a mistake. If I was to be around the PE department then I should look like one of them. This was settled by a very unsubtle ‘you will wear sports clothes tomorrow, won’t you?’ from the Director of Sports. At no point did I try to pass as a teacher...not even a “sort of” PE teacher, in the mode of Fleming



(1997)<sup>30</sup>; and I did not try to become a 'mate' towards the pupils, in the manner of Patrick (1973), or Llewellyn (1980), in order to elicit information from them. I did not feel the need to go and 'hang out' in their evening venues. (For some reason I always find the word 'stalker' nagging somewhere in my mind when I read such accounts, I believe that there is a moral line that needs to be drawn). I presented myself to all as exactly what I was, 'a researcher finding out what a SSC was like'. On the whole the pupils were completely indifferent to this, and simply filed me away amongst the list of unimportant adults, alongside supply teachers and teacher trainees. I had nothing to 'offer' them and so had no value. The response of most staff was a mixture of annoyance and suspicion. Annoyance at my supposed 'idleness' in comparison with their busyness and suspicion of what, exactly, I was finding out and what would be done with it. As I discuss shortly, it took a whole year at the school before I was formally able to allay those suspicions.

I spent the vast majority of my time on field in the PE department. Guided by the Director of Sports, that was to be my 'base'. I spent most of my time at the school tagging along to PE lessons and chatting with the staff there. I got to know the PE staff very well and they were all very open, honest and friendly, but it was a very different relationship with the Director of Sport, whose priority was 'the research'. I was very much aware that my presence put her on edge. I took on the responsibility of an extra-curricular activity in order to feel that I was contributing to the school and in that role I was 'basketball coach' rather than researcher. It did not take too long for me to feel that I was 'one of the

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<sup>30</sup> Fleming (1997) discusses the guilty feeling that in the duplicity of his changing role, from teacher to researcher, his behaviour had somehow "undermined the status of teachers so much that they were no longer seen as credible" (p.144). Though my transparent role may not have been the most effective for eliciting information, it felt far more comfortable than adopting a persona.

department'. This was great in that it gave me a thorough insight into physical activity at the school, as well as a modicum of security, but the extremely detrimental effect was that the rest of the school also saw me as 'one of them'. Pupils constantly asked me whether I was the new PE teacher. And from the staff in other departments I sensed an undercurrent of resentment for the PE department, which I struggled to tap into as I was viewed as being 'on their side'.

I also found that there was no time to 'get to know' the pupils. Their time was so rigidly filled and teachers were so anxious about getting through their curricula, that there was no scope for discussions with children during lesson times. When I did arrange this for the final set of interviews, permission had to be sought from teachers and parents under the premise that it was definitely a 'one off'. Unlike Davies' (1978) experience in school, the children did not relish escaping from their lessons, on the contrary, one or two pupils were actually reluctant to leave their lessons for fear of missing important information. In 1976 Birksted could sit and have hour-long discussions with groups of boys who regularly absented themselves from PE lessons for various reasons. He says, "I was told where the pupils would be waiting for me: in a coffee area of a sports hall. They were told that they should spend the hour talking to me" (p.3). Today even if a child has no kit or a note, they must still take a full role in their PE lessons as, for example, referee. Every minute of 'learning' time is now precious, if results are to be achieved. There is no leeway, 'free-time', no longer exists; and the last thing that you can do when the children are already so pressurised is to start taking up their breaks. An interview with a researcher should not be a form of detention. There was always the option of simply

'loitering' in the student's spaces but I did not feel comfortable with this. As Ball discovered, as well as feeling entirely unnatural this was also just slightly embarrassing (Ball, 1985, p.26). As such my most valuable time with the pupils was the extended interviews that I arranged near the end of my fieldwork, despite all the problems inherent in an 'artificial' situation.

Having completed the fieldwork I now believe that there is no objective truth to find, only subjective opinion. For every ten people that see black one will always see white. For every student that believes that their teacher does nothing to help and encourage them there will be another that cannot praise her enough. Therefore I am not presuming to judge which views are 'right' and which are 'wrong'. Instead I am simply telling the story of my first experience of research and recounting insights and views that were passed to me or which I observed.

I am no longer naïve enough to believe that the voices that I heard actually represented the deep-seated beliefs of individuals, or even that there are necessarily beliefs there to find, and I will discuss this further in the section on interviews. Though I try not to judge I will question and challenge as we do daily without ever acknowledging it as 'research'. Hollway and Jefferson (2000) summarise this:

In everyday informal dealings with each other, we do not take each other's accounts at face value, unless we are totally naïve; we question, disagree, bring in counter-examples, interpret, notice hidden agendas. Research is only a more formalised and systematic way of knowing about people, but in the process it seems to have lost much of the subtlety and complexity that we use...in everyday knowing. We need to bring some of this everyday subtlety into the research process. (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, p.3)

I do not claim to hold unwavering 'truth' in my voice. Many views (mine as well as others) presented here would have changed dramatically if I were to ask the same questions today. Winter and Burroughs (1989) put it this way:

There is a sense in which social reality will always just escape our understanding: every effort of definition is likely to bring about some modification of

our object of study. Put another way, we need to recognise that social reality is a transitory phenomenon. (p.67)

As the well-coined phrase says, the only constant is change. Because of this, I present a picture of my experience, my conversations, my observations, and my data collected, at a certain point in time. Right now my study school will have moved on, but many others will be in a similar situation. Of course my voice is subjective, “the methods for making sense of experience are always personal” (Denzin, 1994, p.501). Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford (1997) comment that researchers find “it is impossible to avoid contaminating the data with their own understandings, intentions, perceptions and values” (p.242) the only difference between one piece of research and the next is the extent to which it is acknowledged. I have tried very hard to look at the evidence objectively... just as you will before reaching your own, subjective opinion. Just as my life experience has influenced my work, so your life experiences will shape your assessment of it. Within any of my school situations the teacher, pupils and myself could have held numerous contrasting views, hence the importance of incorporating reflexivity. This record is how I saw things and how I felt as a thirty-something, ex-teacher, product of a Welsh comprehensive and reputable university, having been at the school for x amount of months and knowing x about the situation and the players.

This methodology is not intended as a self-indulgent monologue, it is more a confession that I am not able to remove myself from this research. To pretend that it were a perfectly objective piece of work would make it a sham, a façade. Krieger (1991) proposes that,

The challenge lies in what each of us chooses to do when we represent our experiences. Whose rules do we follow? Will we make our own? Do we...have the guts to say, ‘You may not like it, but here I am’? (Denzin, 1994, 502)

Well I am a part of my text, as Altheide and Johnson (1994) assert, “Good ethnographies show the hand of the ethnographer” (p.493).

### **3.5 Ethics**

Entry and departure, distrust and confidence, elation and despondency, commitment and betrayal, friendship and abandonment- are all as fundamental here as dry discussions on the techniques of observation, taking field notes, analysing the data and writing the report. (Punch, 1994, p.84)

The dilemmas that Punch describes all came as a bit of a shock to me when I embarked on my research. I was prepared for the obvious formalities, but not for how much my feelings would come into play. As this research dealt with minors, aged 13-17, ethical clearance was first gained from the UCW Ethics Committee. In addition, I felt it pertinent to always inform parents by letter if my research would, in any way, disrupt the child’s school day. How many of those letters actually reached homes remains open to question, but I felt that I had covered my back. I also left a copy of the interview questions at reception if any parents wished to read them through. Throughout the presentation of my data I have used pseudonyms. As James (2004) states, “there could be risks associated with practitioners taking a research stance in relation to their practices and institutions” (p.1) and I did not wish to place any of the contributors to this research in a vulnerable situation. But I soon found that there were even more complicated ethical issues to be tackled.

From the outset of this research I was acutely aware of the awkward position that I was in, buffeted by conflicting agendas. It seemed that the school, the Local Education Authority and the university all had very different ideas when they proposed this piece of research and I became increasingly suspicious of exactly how much discussion between the groups had gone into

its conception. The university was eager to discover the effect (if any) of the lived experience of specialist status on the school; the more discrepancies between policy and reality the better. On the other hand the study school was expected to have research in progress as a positive facet of their bid for re-designation. It quickly became obvious that the school's interest was in my glorifying their achievements, and that my prying into, and recording the mundanities and discordances of day-to-day life made them uncomfortable. This came to a head when the Director of Sport at the school accused me of purposefully choosing to observe only the extra-curricular activities that were poorly attended in order to paint the school in a bad light. It took a long time for me to stop taking such hostility personally, to stop being wounded that someone would think so poorly of me, and to realise, as my Director of Studies repeatedly assured me, that it really is 'all a part of the research process.' Issues of access have since become a primary focus of my discussion.

Another ethical issue was my role at the school. My primary intention was to observe and to interact with the school residents. Rather foolishly (in retrospect), I was also acutely aware that the school was paying part of my bursary and I felt that I should be doing other things that would go towards my 'earning' it. Fielding (1994) commented that a researcher in my position "should avoid promising too much through gratitude" (p.159) but unfortunately I read this 'after the horse had bolted' so to speak. My 'repayment' to the school resulted in my designing and analysing an extensive questionnaire that went out to 240 pupils, which was then repeated to various size samples. I also offered to run a girls' basketball club as an extra-curricular activity, specifying that it was just a fun club for all abilities.

My role at the school was never clear, was I the 'distant researcher' or was I 'one of them'? I don't think that anyone ever really decided, and the resulting ambiguity caused a persistent feeling of unease for all involved.

The emotional issues that Punch raised in the citation at the opening of this section were incredibly important to me. During the entirety of my data collection I was torn between "participant confidentiality" and the need for "publicly available knowledge" (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, p.91). Not because of any contract that had been signed between the participants and myself, but because these people had become my friends. We laughed, we joked, we gossiped; and quite often it was at these moments that the most 'telling' statements about school life were made. Even though I did keep "more than half an eye on the research possibilities that can be seen or engineered from any and every social situation" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1993, p.103) this did not eliminate the guilt that I felt as I transcribed what were, essentially, private conversations. Fielding (1994) warns that the role of ethnographer "always has an element of deception and this can present ethical dilemmas" (p.158). Unfortunately this is impossible to comprehend until experienced.

My role of researcher at the school did not act as some sort of impenetrable barrier to my forming real friendships. Hammersley and Atkinson (1993), rather ridiculously, make the statement that, "one should never surrender oneself entirely to the setting or the moment" (p.103) but if the researcher never fully integrates then how can she/he ever achieve the richness of understanding that we strive for in ethnography? Punch (1994), in closing his essay entitled 'Politics and Ethics in Qualitative Research', concluded, "I recognize this area is a swamp and that I have provided no map" (p.94). Until

this manuscript is handed in I will remain undecided about what should be included and what should be kept 'between friends'. Becker, in his 1964 paper, concluded that, "with respect to the question of what to publish, I think there is no general solution except one as may be dictated by the individual's conscience" (p.280).

The sharing of data with the school, and the 'ownership' of that data was another problem to continually resurface. Obviously the school wanted to hear about the data that glorified their efforts, but what about the more negative results? The staff questionnaire resulted in a considerable amount of contentious information and I felt very awkward handing over a synopsis of those results, as I had previously promised. When I did give the results to Mr Bennett<sup>31</sup> (the head teacher), I suggested that they were perhaps put to one side for the time being, until the impending Ofsted inspection was over with. Whether that data were ever actually used or shelved by the senior management at the school I have no idea, because I did not receive any feedback.

Finally I should mention the concept of 'guilty knowledge', what Fetterman (1989) describes as the "confidential knowledge of illegal or illicit activities" (p.144). There are certain areas in which I would have felt compelled to respond immediately; for example if issues of abuse came to light. Thankfully I did not find myself in such a position.

### **3.6 Sources of data**

One cannot know at the outset what the issues, the perceptions, the theory will be. Case researchers enter the scene expecting, even knowing, that certain events, problems, relationships will be important, yet discover that some actually are of little consequence. (Stake, 1994, p.236)

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<sup>31</sup> Pseudonyms have been used for all participants and the school involved in the research.



With a Case Study you never quite know where you are going until you get started. I had wanted to examine the real effect of SSC status on my study school, but had not foreseen just how critical that would seem to its inhabitants, especially the Director of Sports, whose sole aim was to ensure that the status was having an impact. Because of the dawning of realities such as these my methods of data collection needed to remain flexible as I became more aware of the peculiarities of my situation and as emerging themes were pursued.

Having reviewed the relevant literature I had formulated a ‘fuzzy prediction’ (Bassey, et al, 2001) that by glorifying the competitive nature of sports, a SSC culture would belittle those of very poor physical ability. My feelings about the SSC phenomenon, though not “extremely hostile” in the manner of Walford’s (1994) towards the City Technology Colleges, were dubious. I doubted that the introduction of an emphasis on ‘sport’ at high school age could really have an impact as minds were already set, and I doubted that the manner in which a specialism favours one department as opposed to the whole school, could have a positive effect on all staff and pupils. I had lived the school experience of watching one department showered with funding as others were sidelined, and I knew that bad feelings were caused. My broad aim was to assess the culture of the school. In particular I was interested in whether the school favoured notions of ‘excellence’ or ‘inclusion’, and in finding what effect that culture had on the students and staff of the school.

In order to ease into the situation I spent a number of weeks simply being around at the school. This gave the pupils and staff an opportunity to become accustomed to my presence and me time to ‘find my feet’. I took few notes (though I now regret this as I have fuzzy recollections of events that were, in

hindsight, extremely significant) and simply attempted to get used to the school, its' inhabitants and its' routines. In a way this time became a part of my 'pilot study'. Pilot studies in the pure sense of sample questionnaires and interviews became somewhat null and void at the school where any pupil or staff time was begged and borrowed. Pilot questionnaires were inflicted instead upon friends' teenage children and assessed by fellow teaching professionals. Most data collection in school simply had to evolve as time passed. If a method left me with unsatisfactory results, it could not be altered and re-administered; teacher 'good will' had already been stretched by the initial collection. Instead I had to look at my next task and see how it could be modified to provide the data that had been lacking from the results of the previous method. In many ways I wish that I could have used the whole of this Case Study as a pilot study, in order to do another 'properly' elsewhere.

The data that I gathered at the school came into four broad categories: observation and field notes, interview, review of documents and questionnaire. The observations, resulting in either structured observational data or field notes were most critical in terms of becoming sensitised to the environment. By attending such events as prize-givings and dance evenings, as well as being present for the daily routines, I felt that I was gaining a fuller picture of the participants' environment. Then, through interviewing staff and students, I was able to explore their understanding of the lived experience. Questionnaires and documents provided a broader look at the issues under investigation. The combination of methods allowed the intensity of information that you would expect from an ethnographic study, whilst strengthening the validity of information through triangulation of both qualitative and quantitative data.

### 3.6.1 Field notes

In the third chapter of Delamont's work (1992), which discusses possible pitfalls for the ethnographer, Delamont mentions boredom and over-familiarity. In the same manner Hammersley and Atkinson (1993) describe the field as becoming "too cosy" (p.103). I most certainly suffered from these stumbling blocks; sometimes I was plain tired of being always on the alert. I would hope that such feelings are natural and that I am not the only field researcher to ever relax in the field. What does not seem natural is the type of acute alertness that Delamont (1992) suggests should constantly be a part of the ethnographer's make-up. Delamont criticises an 'untrained observer' for only producing a paragraph of writing after watching a forty minute lesson during which the children were instructed to work in silence. But Delamont does not discuss at any length the exact aim of that researcher's observation, as if that were not relevant. Instead she tells us what the researcher should have recorded:

...the time of day, the weather, the room, the teacher's dress or demeanour, what Mr Evans did for forty minutes, the number of pupils present, their seating arrangements, what they wrote with or on, whether the board was used, if dictionaries were available and so on. (Delamont, 1992, p 41)

Though this does, indeed, prove to us what a thorough ethnographer Delamont is, would all of these aspects have been relevant whatever question the researcher was exploring? Surely there has to be some relevance and a great deal of common sense? If the observer believes that miserable weather has effected the teacher's manner towards the pupils, or vice versa, then it may be relevant, if the teacher had made one child that he did not like use chalk and slate whilst the others used pens and paper then it was relevant, but observations for the sole purpose of showing yourself to be highly observant are, I believe, a waste of ink. Someone could write a hundred pages of notes

and record nothing of value. Being able to discern value and importance in the mundane and ordinary and to filter out the irrelevant is, I believe, of far more value to the ethnographer than the ability to write a thousand words on a forty-minute lesson. Some days I wrote very little and other days I wrote reams. I never wrote for the sake of writing. There is the possibility that I missed something of importance, but I cannot comprehend why the colour of the teacher's tie might make or break my hypothesis. Fielding (1994), states that the ethnographer should "have faith in [their] ability to select the most significant data" (p.167).

Delamont's (1992) chapter on Manuscripts raised another problem that plagued my research: that of turning field notes into full written accounts as soon as possible after the event. It seemed that the more time I spent in school the less able I was to do this. My home life intruded. But I would argue that more often than not a suitable pause before writing up helped me to put my notes into context and begin the filtering process. Approaching the task with a fresh mind enabled me to look at things more objectively and to see the significance of trivialities that may have been missed when not fully alert.

Finally it must be acknowledged that field notes, like any other data can be read in numerous ways, they are not fixed. Delamont (1998) effectively describes the intricacies of fieldnotes:

They are not just inert and cold. They are texts, or other forms of representation, that we create in order to think with. The processes of reflection and analysis are therefore grounded in our active interactions with those materials. There is no single best interpretation of them, or one single mode of analysis.  
(Delamont, 1998, p.15)

Where some may use expansive readings, others may code their work into small, tight categories. Both may have their uses at different times and I have

used both methods. I have used coding to give an indication of occurrences and longer readings in order to find depth in a specific issue or situation.

### **3.6.2 Observation**

As well as day-to-day field notes during my many days spent on site, I also undertook more structured observations. For these I sat at what I deemed to be the least obtrusive point in the room and took notes. If students asked me what I was doing, I would explain that I was writing about what it was like to be at their school. It was rare that they pursued the matter any further, as my answer was not overly exciting to them. The observations included attending a large percentage of the extra-curricular activities in order to see the types of numbers that attended, the aim of the sessions and whether the children enjoyed them. I requested, and was promised records of attendance to these clubs, as I was suspicious that it was a minority attending many clubs rather than the majority attending a few, but the promise never came to fruition.

I arranged structured observations of all of the PE staff in order to see them teaching three consecutive sessions with the same group. I was interested in the organisation, (as different staff appeared to have different 'rules') the participation (and what happened to non-participants), the content, the equipment and the students' enjoyment of the session. For many students this would be their only experience of physical activity during the week and I felt that it was important to observe what they experienced. I was also interested to see whether the school's specialism appeared to imprint on the sessions in any way.

I was given permission to shadow a pupil from each year group for a day, during all of their structured lesson time. The pupils were chosen randomly, with the selection only influenced by my attempting not to be in any teacher's lesson

more than once. I asked the school's administrative staff to print out timetables of the first three children from each year group and I then chose one from each year group that provided me with the maximum spread of teachers and sessions. I was not observing the behaviour of the child; my intention was to experience a 'typical' school day for a child in each year. And through this typical day I was interested to see whether any evidence of specialist status throughout the school could be discerned. This exercise was particularly difficult to arrange, due to the slipperiness of the two-week timetable and the need to first obtain the teacher's permission before attending their session. Though many teachers' acceptance was reluctant (along the 'well if you have to...' lines) only one actually refused. During the observations I looked closely at the classrooms and the teaching and more often than not the session would finish with a quick chat with the teacher.

I also undertook numerous informal observations of PE sessions and during these I quite often took a more active role, perhaps helping to organise equipment or encourage the pupils.

### **3.6.3 Interview**

Methodologists can argue the toss about which interviewing techniques are most likely to encourage people to be truthful, but the assumption that having volunteered or agreed to take part in research, the interviewee will not systematically and deliberately lie in response to every question remains an act of faith. (O'Connell *et al*, 1994, p.144)

Though at no point did I feel that I was deliberately being lied to, like O'Connell *et al*, I did discover that, "Asking questions and getting answers is a much harder task than it would seem at first" (Fontana and Frey, 1994, p.361). Factors such as how I should present myself to the interviewee and the simple matter of where the interview would take place, were far more significant than I had foreseen. I found interviewing the staff rather intimidating and because of

this tried incredibly hard with the students to ensure that they felt relaxed in my company, even though I was probably more nervous than them at times. As I became more comfortable with the interview process the conversations became increasingly fluid. I felt sufficiently in control of the situation to respond to their comments and to spend small periods of time on 'tangents'. My first interviews are littered with missed opportunities to elicit rich information as I nervously worked my way through the prescribed questions.

My methods used to gain a rapport with the students were simple; feigned incompetency at using the Dictaphone (whilst pointing out that it was necessary because I was so slow at writing), an assurance that I was not a teacher and that any information would stay between us, or if used would be used anonymously, and a 'slipped' expletive<sup>32</sup>. These methods, (and in particular the latter), were usually enough to ensure the students that I couldn't possibly be a teacher or anyone in authority whom they should be 'scared' of. I tried to offer a sense of camaraderie, to show that I was interested in them and valued their opinions. Unfortunately all of this did not alter the fact that they were sat alone in a room with a woman whom they didn't know and whose motives they were unsure of. And I found that when I tried to make the motives for my research more explicit, this had a more obvious effect on their interview responses to me. I had a distinct feeling that some of them were simply saying what they thought I wanted to hear.

I felt at times that I must be the worst interviewer in the history of research as with some students it was very difficult to gain any response at all. But I had to put this into the perspective that students are not usually asked for their

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<sup>32</sup> Fleming (1997) also used swearing as a means of breaking down barriers, though I would have felt uncomfortable resorting to mockery of members of staff, as he chose to.

views, as I discuss in later chapters, and also that this school is the only reality that many of them have experienced, they do not have knowledge of 'the wider picture', with which to compare things. School is their 'form of living' (Clandinin and Connelly, 1994, p.259). Additionally there is the concept of tacit knowledge that is virtually impossible to convert into suitable language. If, we, as researchers struggle to describe particular concepts, when our role is to translate meanings into words, then how can we expect a child who may never have been asked to do this before, to do so? Altheide and Johnson (1984) suggest:

Our subjects always know more than they can tell us, usually even more than they allow us to see; likewise we often know far more than we can articulate. Even the most ardent social science wordsmiths are at a loss to transform nuances, subtleties and the sense of the sublime into symbols! For this reason we acknowledge the realm of tacit knowledge, the ineffable truths, unutterable partly because they are between meanings and actions, the glue that joins human intentionality to more concretely focused symbols of practice. (p.491)

It was obvious that my presence influenced the interviewees in various ways and that their responses would have been different if a peer, or a teacher were asking the questions. Also, their responses may have been completely different on a different day, because we feel very differently about ourselves and our experiences from day to day (Wylie, 1974, p.70). And even though they may be completely different, the replies would not be any less honest. Some had very little to say and some were far too eager to say what they thought was 'the right thing'. As I gave my pre-interview spiel I could sense the students desperately trying to suss out what I was actually about. Sometimes, whilst attempting to decipher my response to their comment, the students would quite obviously change their views from one answer to the next. Some interviews were "littered with contradictions and inconsistencies" (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, p.2). Ultimately I had the impression that because of my role as an adult,



the students did not trust my claims to confidentiality at all. This was exemplified by one boy's, 'I don't care if anyone hears it' before telling me about his belief that PE lessons were not being executed properly.

Despite the many hurdles some strong personalities shone through these interviews and very insightful comments were made. Equally the lack of response from many students was very significant for reasons already mentioned. I found the information gained through interview an invaluable source during my field study.

I had hoped to interview all of the members of teaching staff at the school, but found the majority of them extremely reluctant to sacrifice any time. I formulated a structured interview in order to elicit the views of the Heads of Departments on how specialist status had affected their area, but only managed to solicit the time of half of these staff. When I placed a poster in the school staffroom asking all staff to sign up for slots for interviews, only two responded... and these were two particularly friendly characters that I'd already been on good speaking terms with. As a result I interviewed a small percentage of the teachers, but the majority of information came through an extended questionnaire. With the teaching staff I always aimed to 'drop' into conversation as early on as possible, that I, too, was a qualified teacher, who had taught for seven years. This usually broke down some barriers, though to varying degrees, with individual staff. I did not need to feign the "naiveté and humility" that Fielding (1994, p.158) suggests using as an observational tactic, in order for participants to explain the basics of their lives at school, unfortunately those feelings were only too real. But apart from a small minority of teachers (one of

whom was the head teacher) many staff retained an almost visible guardedness towards me for the duration of my fieldwork.

Near the end of my time at the school I was eventually allowed to use a room for some of the time, and spent many hours there interviewing students throughout the age and ability range; inviting them to give their views on their school and their hopes for the future. My earlier attempts at student interviews were not so productive. At the end of the Sports Questionnaire, administered to all Year Nines, I had asked the students to indicate whether they would be happy to talk further about some of the issues covered<sup>33</sup>. From those that had replied positively I randomly chose thirty children to interview and notified their teachers and form tutors regarding times. Even after a second reminder only about half of the children turned up. In addition the only 'space' I could find (I was offered no other) was the reception area, which had numerous distractions and put the students within listening distance of the school administrative staff.

For the final sample of student interviews I thought it important that the children actually volunteered, in the hope that they might all turn up. The children signed-up for the interviews in their registration groups, and were 'bribed' with the opportunity to have 'their say' and with the possibility of it taking time out of lessons. I hoped that this would appeal to the more confident who were happy to speak, as well as to those who simply wanted to avoid work. As a result I was pleasantly surprised at the cross-section of children, from all ability bands and social groups, which I was able to talk to in the form of a semi-structured interview. I remain convinced that some of my interviewees had put

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<sup>33</sup> I now realise that this method could have created a bias in the 'type' of children that were interviewed, though this was not apparent in the cohort.

down their names as a joke that had backfired horribly on them. Getting 'blood from a stone' was a phrase that occurred to me a number of times.

### **3.6.4 Review of Documents**

This suffered from the ethnographer's curse of hoarding information and was far more extensive than I had first imagined. Not quite the simple review of school policy that I had foreseen, there were staff handbooks, publicity material, numerous letters home, the school magazine, the school website, Ofsted reports, staff notices and minutes of meetings; as well as the archives of the local newspaper which featured articles on the school. All available literature was gathered with plans to scan it for relevant information. The 'moment in time' parameters were also an issue here, as, for example, when I investigated the school policies, many had not been updated for many years, but were in the process of being re-drafted for an Ofsted inspection. Obviously matters pertaining to Specialist Status were a particular focus for my analysis, but also the absence of information was pertinent in some situations, for example in the Admissions Policy. I felt that it was significant that at the time of review, at the beginning of the school's third year of specialist status, issues such as admission, which were directly affected by its new status, had not been formally dealt with in terms of policy.

I found it extremely difficult to analyse this literature, as the types of themes that concerned me were rarely, if ever, directly discussed within it. More significant was their absence. Tallying became very useful in terms of the amount of times PE and Sports activities or initiatives were mentioned compared to other areas, the amount of photographs showing physically active students and whether those portrayed exclusively boys or girls, etc. Also a

comparison between the written claims of the school and the observed reality was particularly pertinent.

### **3.6.5 Questionnaire**

For a number of reasons the questionnaire became a primary tool for obtaining data within the restrictions of the school. With the students it provided access to widespread views that could not have been gained through interview because of time limitations, and with staff it proved to be the best tool for them to 'tell it as it is' under the protection of anonymity. As was previously mentioned the staff questionnaire was initially formulated as an interview, but as the staff were reluctant to talk face to face it was converted to a questionnaire. Time was always a monumental issue with the teaching staff and very few were willing to sacrifice even a few minutes in order to talk to me. As they were under such pressure, if they had any spare time then they wanted to relax. As time progressed it also became obvious that if they were going to make any comments to me then they would prefer them to be anonymous and written, as some of them were quite critical. The questionnaire also proved a good tool for eliciting information by post from those whom it would be difficult to meet with, such as school governors and staff in other schools.

After the first wave of (Year 9) questionnaires was administered under the direction of the Director of Sports, obtaining any further information was an uphill battle and often samples remained incomplete. The difficulty with questionnaires was that I was always relying on the goodwill of staff to administer them (and it is an accepted fact that very little goodwill remains in schools these days). As my research was very low down on the teachers' list of priorities, questionnaires were often completed rather half-heartedly, if at all. If the senior management at

the school had shown more of an interest in, and a greater support for the research then I am certain that far more could have been achieved. This was why I was so aggrieved, when, at the end of my data collection phase, (during which time I had repeatedly needed to cajole staff into playing an administrative role in order to help me complete some of the holes in my data), I attended a school meeting concerned with the school's specialist status. Unlike previous meetings, this meeting was attended by a senior member of staff. This is my record of that meeting:

Due in particular to low numbers, again, I was given a spot to update the group on my research... As I went through the items I also included those things that had to be aborted due to a lack of response and support from teachers/ pupils. As I went on to talk about how the focus of my work had changed, one of the 'failed' pieces of data gathering, a follow-up questionnaire, was again referred to. At this point the assistant head chipped in and said "well we just get them all in the hall during their PDS time and make them do it". As if it were the easiest thing in the world. I politely put in that other than requesting things of teachers I had been in no position to 'make' them do anything and because of this much of my data had remained incomplete. The assistant head replied 'but I can'.

I was annoyed - how much time would have been saved and how many abortive efforts avoided if someone in authority had been supporting me like this early on? I'd had it made clear to me<sup>34</sup> from the outset that I was simply to 'tip toe' around the teachers and promises of support from various staff had often been empty...now here was someone, as my fragmented data collection was coming to a close, who could have made things happen... It was too late. (230103)

In reality, despite the suggestion of support, the gathering of the students in the hall to complete their questionnaires never did take place.

At the very start of my research in October 2001, a Year 9 form group was given a sheet (Appendix A) on which to express their views about sport and their school being a SSC. This was to give me a brief indication whether the students thought that it was unique coming to a sports college and reasons for their thoughts.

Yr 9 Sports Questionnaires (Appendix B) were my first major task at the school in order to gain favour with the Director of Sport. The school had been

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<sup>34</sup> By the headteacher.

given the opportunity to 'buy into' a questionnaire that would give an overview of children's general health and fitness, what they did and didn't enjoy in terms of physical activity, how they got to school each day and so on. I offered to produce a similar questionnaire for the school instead. This would save the school expense, but also meant that the data produced would be available for my use. The 'Sports Questionnaire' was administered to all Year 9's with the hope of reviewing their responses a year later, to see if attendance at a SSC had altered their views on sport and physical activity. The questionnaire also asked for information on the children's home situations and the levels of parental involvement in sport, as I thought that these were interesting areas for future research. Some of the questions were quite personal and the children were instructed to leave out any questions that they did not wish to answer. The questionnaire also included a section that would give an indication of the child's level of self-esteem; this could then be related to their involvement in clubs and activities.

By re-assessing the students a year later, I hoped to see how views had changed, an aspect of which could be related to being educated in a SSC environment. Obviously there were other variables that had to be taken into account when looking at the results of this comparison, a primary one proving to be the students' change in attitude overall after a year at high school.

My original Year 9 sample consisted of 240 completed questionnaires, 131 of which came from boys and 109 from girls. These questionnaires had been completed by the children in their registration groups during their first term at the school. The processing of this data was a monumental task with no administrative support, and so I planned to cut the Year 10 follow-up sample

down to 80, one third of the original cohort, to make it a more manageable amount for processing for comparison (for questionnaire see Appendix C). As the second sample was no longer a 'whole class' activity, it was very difficult to get those eighty questionnaires returned. After a number of reminders to their form tutors I finally received questionnaires from 70 students, less than I had hoped. This made me realise that I should have administered at least one hundred questionnaires in order to obtain the 80 that I required. When processing the data, I first compared the results of the sample 70 whilst they were in Year 9, to the results of the whole sample, in order to give an indication of their 'typicality'. Their results in Year 9 and Year 10 were then compared. I believe that many results from these questionnaires are typical of students of that age and provide a platform for future research. The results are discussed more fully in the next chapter.

A similar, but shortened version of the 'Sports Questionnaire' was given to Year 8s in feeder schools (Appendix D). Enough were produced so that every Year 8 could complete one during a whole class activity and two hundred completed questionnaires were received. From these one hundred were randomly sampled to be processed, as I deemed one hundred enough to be representative of the sample but to remain manageable in terms of processing. To gain an indication of the difference in views whilst at the different schools was the main priority here. How strongly are views affected by being in a SSC environment as opposed to 'just' a middle school? The middle school results were passed on to the schools that took part to be utilised for progression and development and were kept by myself for future comparison.

PE teachers from schools in the SSC's pyramid were asked (via a short, multiple-choice, questionnaire) what effect the specialist status of the study school had had on them over the past two years (Appendix E). Six out of eight schools replied. The aim of this was to see how clearly the impact of SSC status could be felt in its feeder establishments, or in the 'wider community'. Were they benefiting and in what areas would they like more support? The results were passed to the Director of Sports for development.

A short questionnaire was given to all teaching staff at the study school (Appendix F), asking for views about the ethos<sup>35</sup> of the school and its SSC status in the Autumn Term 2001. This questionnaire focused on any impact that specialist sports status may have had on the culture of the school and attempted to elicit some views on educational justice. A third of staff responded and results were fed back to staff and management.

An in-depth interview/ questionnaire was administered to all teaching staff at the study school that covered many views about all aspects of school life at the end of the same academic year (July 2002). 33 responses were received, just over 50% of the teaching staff. Many of the insights obtained by these questionnaires (Appendix G) would be relevant to all schools going through a process of change due to specialist status, or simply in terms of re-examining their management structure. They gave a strong indication of how valued the staff felt. I was eager to gain the responses of staff from other (non-PE) departments in particular, to see their opinions on PE being 'favoured', and I received some very frank statements. An analysis was passed on to the Senior Management of the school, though rather tentatively as I did not imagine that

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<sup>35</sup> I did actually use this term with the staff, as it was relevant to the Government literature.



they would be overly pleased with some of the views. In April 2002 a questionnaire was sent out to all of those then sitting on the Governing Board of the school (Appendix H). This questionnaire asked how the governors felt about the school's specialist status and the culture of the school. After two reminders, only 8 of the eighteen questionnaires were completed and returned.

### **3.7 Methods of Data Analysis**

...no permanent telling of a story can be given. There are only always different versions of different, not the same stories, even when the same site is studied...all texts are biased, reflecting the play of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and culture, suggesting that so-called objective interpretations are impossible.  
(Denzin, 1998, p.328)

The extremely annoying thing about qualitative data, as Denzin (1998) discovered, is that there is no straightforward way of analysing it. Robson (1993) refers to qualitative data as an 'attractive nuisance'. Just as gut instinct directs us in our collection of the data, the same instinct causes us to focus on areas of particular importance or relevance when we review it.

Coffey and Atkinson (1996) argue that:

Qualitative data, analysed with close attention to detail, understood in terms of their internal patterns and forms, should be used to develop theoretical ideas about social processes and cultural forms that have relevance beyond these data themselves.  
(p.163)

In my analysis I avoid what Janesick (1994, p.215) refers to as 'methodolatry'. I am not going to prioritise any one method of data analysis over my desire to present a 'substantive story'. As I have already discussed, if the same methods of data gathering were used in a similar situation, the same theoretical interpretations may be reached, but there is an equal chance that they may not. My qualitative research cannot be measured in the same way as quantitative research; it is not objective and does not pretend to be. I did not base my analysis on an existing theory, instead my analysis emerged from the themes and patterns found in my data. Ball (2006) says that:

...most researchers individually and collectively devote a great deal of time and effort to obscuring the creative and personal aspects of research in the hope of acquiring some crumbs of symbolic capital which might come from aligning themselves with the objectivist vision...It rips it out of the context of its social production. (p.5)

For reasons that I have already stated, tied up in ontology, I did not agree with theorists that suggested that I should take my work back to the participants. The views that I obtained from others are recorded in their own words, as written questionnaire answers and as audio recording; and my observations are just that, my observations, *my* interpretation of the scene. The researcher should be deemed trustworthy enough to record, as seen or heard, events and spoken comments without needing to have them verified. Only if the researcher wished to state the 'why' behind the emotion or action, would verification from the player be needed.

There is not always a 'reciprocal relationship' between researcher and researched and when there is, this often serves to place more influence on the participants' responses (as I found with student interviews). If I were to 'converse and negotiate' (Cutcliffe and McKenna, 2002) my interpretation of events with hundreds of students and staff at my study school, the negotiations would probably continue until most of the students had left (and long after my bursary had expired). And "at what point in this process do the findings become credible?" (Cutcliffe and McKenna, 1999, p.378).

I have already stated that these are my observations and that they are open to different interpretations; and that should be enough. I am able to say that I have reflected upon it 'I know' my own interpretation of events, I do not, as Cutcliffe and McKenna (1999) suggest, need to discuss this with my participants to become 'empirically confident' (2002, p.615). The accuracy of an interpretation does not increase proportionately with the number of people that

agree with it. If I gained verification from a teacher that they did actually say something (assuming that they actually remembered the event) would I then need to gain further verification from the thirty students who were present in the class? And what if thirty pupils present agreed with my recording of events, but the teacher disagreed, unhappy at the light in which it portrayed him? Where does verification leave us then? Who has the final say on the credibility of a statement? I would argue that as I was the only one studying the situation and taking notes my memory of events should be clearest. It would be safe to say that I was in the strongest position to recount what happened, though, as already stated, I would have no authority on the *why*.

### ***The Practical Processes***

*Moving from the field to the text to the reader is a complex, reflexive process.*  
(Denzin, 1994, p.500)

As I believed them to be the richest source of data my first job was to pick out themes from my interviews with students. These were in the form of primary themes, such as 'Enjoyment of school', which were then further broken down into secondary themes, such as 'Teachers' and 'Lessons'. I did not believe that an electronic package would be adequate to perform this task for me, as in many cases allusions to an issue were far more telling than a direct discussion of it. When one student repeatedly made comments on the subject of teachers and other pupils 'taking more notice' of those students who had joined sports teams, the topic of interest was not 'taking notice' it was, actually, perceptions of success and self esteem. The actual terms 'success' and 'self esteem' are not mentioned once throughout the conversation. Coding was a possibility, but I was happier simply copying and pasting sections of relevant text into the tables that I had set up for each theme. I submerged myself in the data, repeatedly reading

through the transcripts until they were entirely familiar and the emerging themes became clear. After doing this I again analysed those tables of themes and reduced the data into charts that were easy to view. These charts would provide an 'overview' of conceptions on each topic, from which discussions could then be developed by using the fuller text. I remained acutely aware of the inappropriateness of lifting chunks of dialogue out of context if true meaning was to be retained.

### ***Triangulation of Data***

The rest of my data was approached in the same way. Fieldnotes, observations, questionnaire results were all brought together as a bulk of data and then teased out into relevant categories, which were copied into files of themes. These extensive files were then re-assessed sequentially, as hunches were re-examined and refined. The next step, of course was the triangulation of the data, to search for interconnectedness between sources, and between macro and micro-data. Where were there agreements and where were there obvious discrepancies and why should that be? Then, across the sections of data, groups of instances could be grouped and discussed. Under each thematic heading repetitions and correlations were examined and noted. When presenting this data I attempted at all times to also include and discuss deviant cases rather than choosing only those cases that would support my argument.

The theoretical understandings that emerged were then constructed into a flowing narrative for the benefit of the reader. This narrative attempts to convey the relationships between concepts and analytic terms in a clear and simple way that facilitates the production of the readers' own interpretation. Very often quantitative data is used to present the 'broad sweep' before I go into more

intimate detail. In all cases I have attempted to present the participants' own words without dilution or contamination.

### **3.8 Limitations and Delimitations of the Study**

Qualitative writers are off the hook, so to speak. They don't have to try to play God, writing as disembodied omniscient narrators claiming universal, atemporal general knowledge; they can eschew the questionable metanarrative of scientific objectivity and still have plenty to say as situated speakers, subjectivities engaged in knowing/telling about the world as they perceive it.

(Richardson, 1998, p.348)

As Richardson (1998) points out, qualitative writing is not held hostage to conventions. It is very difficult in this research to apply the paradigms of validity, generalisability and reliability as those 'rules' ultimately apply to quantitative, scientifically structured situations. Janesick (1994) explores these concepts within the field of the Case Study and makes some pertinent points. Validity, she proposes, has actually been transposed from the quantitative arena and so needs to be redefined in the qualitative field. A qualitative study cannot be judged using positivistic criteria (Cutcliffe and McKenna, 1999).

When we are questioning the validity of qualitative research we are not asking whether our scientific process was appropriate for the results required, but does "a given explanation fit a given description..." (Janesick, 1994, p.216). Hammersley (1992), who argues for constructing criteria by which the credibility of research findings can be established, also states that the recounting of a situation is valid if it accurately represents the features that it intends to describe. But how can that be tested? What position is anyone in to judge what is 'truth' and what is the product of a vivid imagination? After all, the situation can never be replicated. Altheide and Johnson (1994) are right when they suggest that there has been a lack of input into developing criteria for measuring the thoroughness of empirical research (p.485), but is that because researchers

are avoiding what is, after all, an impossible task? Janesick argues that in their obsession with generalisability, validity and reliability, many educational studies have lost their focus:

I hope that we can move beyond discussions of this trinity of psychometrica and get on with the discussion of powerful statements from carefully done, rigorous long-term studies that uncover the meanings of events in individuals' lives...In depersonalising the most personal of social events, education, we have lost our way. (Janesick, 1994, p.217)

Verification of classifications by a suitably experienced colleague (Burnard, 1991) and audit trails (Guba and Lincoln, 1981) may help appease some critics (and for this reason have been a part of my own data management), but they are, essentially, tokenistic. Taking the results back to the participants for verification, as I have already discussed, is also a common suggestion, (Ashworth, 1993, Leininger, 1994, Lincoln and Guba, 1985), but this process raises as many questions as it answers. I have already addressed some, and Cutcliffe and McKenna(1999) summarise the issues quite succinctly:

An important question appears to centre around at what point in this process do the findings become credible? Should the researcher be concerned with each of the participants' verification or only a portion of them? Should the researcher try to reach the point where a participant verifies all of these concepts, categories or theory, or only a portion of these? (p.378)

When judging credibility I would argue that the existence of thorough field records (including observations and transcriptions) and some common sense interpretations from the researcher, are sufficient for the reader to decide on the trustworthiness of the account. It does not take an intricate formula to decide whether the evidence appears to support the assertion. Also, the use of the participants' own voices, rather than interpretations, are used whenever possible, and placed within their context. I have made no pretence that my observations are the objective 'truth' and have made clear that they are my subjective interpretation. Weber (1946) comments that inevitably the

conclusions and implications to be drawn from a study are largely grounded in the moral and political beliefs of the researcher. All knowledge is perspectival (Altheide and Johnson, 1994). I have substantiated my interpretations by making my intentions clear, with a reflexive account of myself and the processes of my research (Altheide and Johnson, 1994). I have clearly related how I went about the production of my data, my methods, the setting, interactions between researcher and participants and contexts. My observations and conclusions are validated by participants' voices. The triangulation of qualitative and quantitative methods and various data collection techniques also lend credibility to my findings. I believe that as a qualitative researcher you can do no more than this, because, ultimately, who has the authority to decide which interpretation is 'correct'? (Janesick, 1994, p.216). We are left with no choice but to return to those common sense skills that we use day-to-day. I present the data as my opinion, but I hope that I present enough convincing evidence to make my interpretations valuable. As I have concluded elsewhere, "The final decisions on 'truth' must be left to the judgement of the reader" (Solvason, 2005b, p.31).

I have discussed the conundrum of generalisability in some detail while investigating the Case Study, and so will not repeat myself here, but with regards to reliability, Janesick (1994) points out that "the value of the Case Study is its uniqueness; consequently, reliability in the traditional sense of replicability is pointless here" (p.217). The information presented in a Case Study has to stand solidly on its own merits as the process can never be repeated. As long as anecdotalism is avoided and thorough analysis employed, then the information presented should be considered sound. Generalisations can be made, but they will be of the 'fuzzy' variety that Bassey *et al* (2001)

suggest. I am not claiming that the consequences of specialist status that occurred in this school will happen in all similar schools, instead I am suggesting that they may happen; and by doing so erecting signposts for further research.

### 3.9 Access Negotiations

One profound limiter where this research was concerned was the accessibility of the research venue. Here I lay out a simple account of the access experience.

Apart from the Head teacher, Mr Bennett, who had some personal insight into carrying out research, no one at the study schools seemed to know what to make of me. An example of this was during my early days of familiarising myself with the PE Department<sup>36</sup>:

I felt that I'd seen predominantly girls the week before so tried to see a boys' lesson. I approached Mr. Jenkins, a very pleasant, funny, helpful individual and he tried to 'get rid of me' with the reasoning that his lesson wasn't structured. He took me to Mr. Fielding's session in the fitness room instead and asked him (after referring to me as a spy) was his lesson more structured? No, he replied, it had been, but they knew what they were doing now, so they just got on with it. Mr. Jenkins asked 'what exactly is it that you want to do?'... to which I answered that I just wanted to see the kids and get to know what was going on a bit more so that I didn't feel such an outsider. This won the sympathy vote and Mr. Jenkins took me back to his lesson and we talked the whole time. (190202)

Because the staff did not know, or did not understand my intentions, naturally they were suspicious of me. For example, during a pleasant conversation with the Head of PE, Mr Smith, during which we talked about my role and expectations of the research, he 'joked' that 'I'd have to get as much info as possible from him now, as he may not be speaking to me this time next year' (280102). I had been introduced in my absence as 'someone doing research', and my presence was acknowledged during a staff briefing and that was all. The school agenda was so packed that there was no 'slot' for me to

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<sup>36</sup> As suggested by Fielding (1994), I have used single speech marks "" within my fieldnotes to indicate a précis of conversation, and double speech marks "" to indicate a direct quotation.



introduce myself to the staff until almost a year after my research had proceeded.

Things didn't ever run smoothly between the Director of Sports, Ms White, (my primary contact at the school), and myself, primarily because of my own naivety and ignorance. When I began the research I had the impression that Ms White's expectations were that I would make a written record of the (positive) effects that SSC status was having on the school. When it came to light that I was actually questioning *whether* the status was having *any* real effect on the school, it was taken as a criticism of the work that she had been doing. Unfortunately I was too naïve to fully comprehend this at the time, and took her ensuing irritation as a result of her personal dislike of me, rather than from the fear and aggression that results when one feels that their efforts are being attacked. Ms White was my primary 'gatekeeper' and I was slow to analyse the vulnerability of her situation.

Rather narrow-mindedly I had viewed the school as an 'institution', and had not sufficiently considered the amount of personal and emotional input individuals invest in making such institutions work. Punch (1994) comments that by "using one's personality to enter the field situation...one has to face the personal and emotionally charged accusations that ... accompany this style of work" (p.94). Before commencing the research I had no idea of how emotionally challenging it would be. It was only as a result of the following attack, where Ms White openly questioned my motives for carrying out the research, that I really began to recognise the fragility of her position. Whilst observing an outside coach teaching extra-curricular basketball at Green Acre, and his telling me

about the difficulties that many of the girls had with transport, Ms White entered the venue. I record:

During the session Ms White came in to check how it was going and I started to make conversation. I mentioned what the coach had said about problems with transport, and she snapped 'well their parents could bring them.' Then I mentioned about the encouraging atmosphere with the girls (who were clapping and cheering on one another's attempts), and how it would be good to get more of that into PE lessons. She informed me that 'most of the girls are like that in their PE lessons'...  
(270902)

After this I received a scathing email from Ms White accusing me of purposefully going to the extra-curricular activities that were poorly attended, and that I was missing the whole point of this 'ethos thing'. At this point I placated her with the fact that I would be observing all of the extra-curricular activities, but, nevertheless, I felt stung by the attack. It all felt very personal, but with that I realised that it all was extremely personal to her. It was her 'baby', her ambitious project, and my questioning it was an insult to her. From this point on I attempted to shift the visible target of my investigations to ensure that it all focused on the students, their opinions and feelings, and not what was actually being carried out at the school.

Later I did become interested in the numbers attending activities, because I was convinced that it was the same nucleus of pupils who were attending many activities, and by doing so making pupil attendance in general appear far higher than it actually was. In fact, I discovered that this had been raised as a concern when the school first applied for specialist sports status. Their application states:

Though there is immensely strong participation during extended curricular activities, the Faculty is concerned that there is a hard core of very able and keen participants, and these pupils obscure the fact that there is still a significant number of non-participants.  
(Sports College Application, 1998, p.14)

I asked Ms White whether it would be possible to see attendance sheets for the activities to investigate this. She told me that the sheets were to be completed by the technician, but that I could have them soon. After a few

reminder requests for the figures I gave in, and never did see the attendance sheets.

Similarly, at the end of the same year I produced a very short questionnaire that I hoped could be given to all pupils in their form period. It was reduced to one side of A5 and asked such questions as: 'Are you proud of your school?' 'Do you know what the school motto is?' and 'Does your school have a special feel to it because it is a SSC?' These questionnaires were intended to provide a very quick overview of the pupils' perceptions of the culture of the school. They were passed on to the Director of Sports, Ms White, who would arrange their administration. Some weeks later I noticed them still in her office and commented on them. I am not sure why, but they were never given out. Maybe it was a fear of the results, maybe a lack of time, most likely the questionnaires were so low down on Ms White's list of priorities that they simply became inconsequential.

Ms White was not the only teacher that I encountered aggression from. I also record "walking into a rather irate teacher who had my questionnaire in his hand" (100702). Mr Brown, a humanities teacher, was on his way to the Head's office to find out exactly whom the recorded information was going to. I was able to reassure him that the information was mine and that no one's confidentiality would be jeopardised. One of my most revealing phases of data gathering followed as a result of my conversation with him, which I will discuss shortly.

I had been told by Ms White that events such as 'pupil shadowing' had happened many times before with teacher trainees and that the teachers were familiar with it. But it seems that my presence was very different from the presence of a student on teacher training; I seemed to have somehow earned

myself a position on the blacklist next to Ofsted. An inexperienced trainee teacher was one thing, I was not inexperienced, and so my presence was more intimidating. The power dynamics were completely different. Even after speaking with them personally one or two teachers were still very reluctant to accept my presence in their classrooms, whilst just one refused. I was simply another pressure that they could do without.

Although Mr Bennett, the head teacher, had very clearly voiced his support of my research, for obvious reasons he could not be involved in the daily technicalities. A pertinent problem in terms of teacher time and 'good will' was the change in contractual agreements for teaching staff that had recently come into existence. Mr Bennett explained that within it teachers were only required to officially meet with colleagues for one hour per week outside of their teaching time. Therefore, with the importance of regular faculty meetings, whole staff meetings were very rare occasions, usually reserved for teacher-training days; which is why I had to wait a year to be on the agenda of one. Also, teachers were only required to be observed teaching twice a year, and this would be as a part of their professional development. Whereas my own years of teaching involved a great deal of time sacrificed through 'good grace', such sacrifice did not occur at this school in general. Senior management met together far more regularly, and so, naturally, discussed and made far more decisions, but they were on a different contract. So Mr Bennett made it very clear to me that the teaching staff were not required to give me any time or space at all, regardless of whether or not he personally believed that they should take part in the research. As the head teacher he had no power to enforce cooperation from his staff. To some extent Mr Bennett referred to the other teaching staff as though,

he, too were an outsider. When I admitted to him the horrible feeling that I was doing no more than 'getting in the way', his answer was: "Join the club - perhaps we should meet together regularly for therapy sessions" (100602).

In addition to the teacher's time restrictions, I also discovered a 'what's the point?' attitude from teaching staff about making any comments. They felt that with how little time they had anyway, it was silly to waste it making points that would only be ignored. After talking with a group of non-PE teachers in the staffroom one day, I recorded:

When a new group joined the table and discovered who I was, the general consensus was that teachers have absolutely no time. They also generally agreed that they were used to not attempting to make any comments because it wouldn't make any difference, no one would listen. (100702)

It was from this same group of staff that I came to realise how unhelpful my alliance with the PE department was in terms of gaining information. As I will discuss in some detail shortly, they appeared to resent how one department had been favoured over others and felt that 'they were missing out'. The Director of Sport was eager that I feel like 'one of them' in the PE faculty, but as a sub-group they did seem to be resented by a sector of the staff. Fleming (1997) explores the problem of conforming to the standards of one group of participants (in his case teaching staff) resulting in ostracism from another group of participants (in his case pupils). Although Fleming deemed it quite easy to solve this by 'divesting himself of his authority' status, I think that this area is far more complicated than his solution implies. In general in social situations, once labelled as belonging to one particular sub-group, especially a resented one, it is very difficult to cross barriers and infiltrate other 'camps'.

In addition to such access issues, the school was informed that it was to have an Ofsted inspection during the time of my intense visits, resulting in more

form filling and planning for highly stressed teachers. I was well aware that my presence was going to be even more unwelcome than usual during that time. I 'lay low' during Ofsted week, but re-started my lesson observations straight after. There were lots of sarcastic 'oh lovely' comments from the teaching staff with regards to my visits, but on the whole they kept very light-hearted about it. I think that after Ofsted they were past caring.

As well as convincing staff to respond personally to such things as questionnaires and observations, there was also the need for them to support the activities that I did with the pupils. After the first set of questionnaires (administered to all Year Nine pupils) was completed<sup>37</sup>, everything else was an uphill struggle. The first set of pupil interviews were a typical example:

This day I began my Year Nine Interviews. I had invited thirty children who had not objected to being interviewed when given the option at the end of the 'sports questionnaire'. They had taken a letter home and a letter had been handed to the form or class teacher informing them which child would be out of their class and when. About one third of the children turned up, with a few more after repeated reminders. (030702)

Collecting data didn't ever become any easier. Despite getting to know some members of staff very well (primarily those in the PE department) and becoming on good speaking terms with others, this did not necessarily mean that they became any more willing to assist in my endeavours. They were quite happy to sit and chat with me, but when it came to things like questionnaire retrieval, they were not so enthusiastic.

### ***Researcher Effect***

I cannot leave this discussion of access without touching upon the idea that the researcher may, knowingly or inadvertently, influence the research setting by their very presence. My presence served to raise consciousness

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<sup>37</sup> This was a set of data that the Director of Sport was eager to have, as the questionnaire replaced a data collection scheme that she was going to 'buy into'.

about teaching approaches and to initiate certain discussions. My presence introduced issues such as ethos, inclusion and elitism that caused some teachers to question their own school experience and influence. Staff initiated many conversations with me on these topics which otherwise would likely have remained unconsidered. Also there were more obvious influences, for example, almost every school speech in the academic year 2001-2002 was certain to make reference to the dual aims of the school to promote both participation and excellence. During one end of year speech by Mr Bennett I cynically noted that he had used the terms so often that “I thought that he might stop to ask me if I was taking notes at some point” (180702). There is a chance that some discussions and speeches *may* have occurred regardless of my presence, but the probability is that my raising such issues had an effect.

When teachers did sacrifice time and space to me, for example by allowing me to observe their lessons, I then felt eminently grateful. When I’d arranged to shadow various students for a day, to observe a typical day’s experiences, I had noted in my letter to teachers that I would not reveal the child’s identity, as that would inevitably affect their interactions with them. For some teachers, the curiosity was too much and they just had to ask. Fortunately they usually waited until the end of the lesson. By the end of the lesson it was no longer an issue and I was happy to reveal the child’s identity. Unfortunately one teacher asked at the beginning of the lesson and I felt obliged to answer, that it would be too rude to refuse. I recorded that: “It definitely affected her - he was the first child that she picked on during her lesson” (081002).

These are influences that one needs to be aware of and to acknowledge as an ethnographic researcher, but they are areas over which we have very little

control. My method of tackling this effect was to become so familiar to the setting that they would cease to consider my reasons for being there and cease to 'second guess' the evidence that I was looking for. This worked to an extent, and the pupils were uninhibited by my presence, but even after two years some staff remained more self-aware when they felt that I may record their actions or comments.

### **Acceptance**

Despite my inexperience, on the whole most staff gradually became used to my presence. For some staff I even became something of a 'sounding board', an outsider to air their grievances against departmental organisation or managerial staff at. Certain key staff, that had been silent and guarded around me, became the most vociferous in sharing their complaints. I recall, after my encounter with the irate Mr Brown, that:

He then sat and filled in the form and we talked about some of the ideas in there. While we did others joined us. Eventually a few heads of department were talking and said 'yes we should fill it in and say what we really think.' That moment I feel was a real turning point. I never did get close to having all of the questionnaires filled in, but thirty-two were completed. Enough to be significant. (010802)

The head teacher remained open and good-humoured about the research and was one of a few staff at the school that treated me without suspicion as if I were a regular human being. This was typical of my exchanges with him:

I asked could I look at the whole school policies (as I had previously asked him in email) and he said that they were a bit of a mess and in the middle of being re-structured but that I was free to look at them. As usual his attitude was a very relaxed one about 'where the school is right now' and changes that need to be made. Somehow we got on to the subject of truancy and Mr Bennett mentioned that the attendance so far that year had been very good. I asked had they got rid of a large batch of regular offenders in the summer and he replied, very tongue in cheek, "no it's our wonderful school ethos and all of the wonderful things that we have going on". Before adding - "yes, and we have got rid of a lot of offenders". (230902)

The following data is taken from very different stages along this journey and from individuals who had vastly different views of the research process.



## ***Summary***

In this chapter I have looked at the complexities involved in developing a piece of qualitative, ethnomethodological research and some of the barriers that added to the difficulty. In the following chapter I present the qualitative and quantitative data that were eventually collected by observation, review of documents, interview and questionnaire. These data clearly show a huge spectrum of views, which would have been overlooked had only the voice of the researcher been heard.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Presentation of the Data

#### *Overview*

This chapter presents excerpts of data selected from thousands of pages of literature, fieldnotes, interview transcripts, questionnaires and structured observations. The data were repeatedly refined in order to display the most accurate picture of Green Acre at a moment in time. The data give concrete examples of the rather nebulous concepts of school culture, the effects of the specialism and the focus on inclusion or excellence.

#### **4.1 The School Context<sup>38</sup>**

Green Acre High School was founded in 1976. In 1998 it applied for SSC status and started functioning as such in 1999. My research at the school began in 2001, after the school had been functioning as a SSC for two years. Green Acre describes itself as “A Modern School in a Pleasant Rural Setting” in its 2003-2004 Prospectus. It is a 13-18 mixed community high school, and was the first SSC to be established in the county. Over recent years the number of pupils on roll has remained reasonably steady at approximately 1000 students (1033 in 1997 and 989 in 2002), but there has been a large turnover in staff. Between 2000 and 2002, 18 teachers left the school and 22 joined. It has a strong sixth form which has grown substantially over recent years and which boasted 178 pupils in 2002. In 2002 only a small number of pupils (31, 3%) were from ethnic minority groups. Seven of these had English as a second language, but their English acquisition was well advanced. The number of children on the Special

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<sup>38</sup> The following information is based on data from the school's 1997 and 2002 Ofsted Inspection Reports. I have made clear which year I am referring to in all cases.

Educational Needs register was deemed as average at 15%. Although the LEA had designated the school as suitable for educating wheelchair-bound pupils, and although disability training was on the staff agenda, during my time at the school there was only one wheelchair user. The school site is a dual use facility that, Green Acre's 1998 application states, has 94,000 community users annually.

### ***The Presentation of the school***

In 2002 Ofsted described the appearance of the school. In summary, they suggested that "in too many classrooms and too many corridors, the environment is cold and unwelcoming" (p.20). The fact that the school was built in the seventies is obvious from the abundance of concrete. The main school buildings are structured in a rectangle surrounding a paved courtyard area, with some trees and benches, where the children can socialise. A walkway leads from this to another, similar courtyard, enclosed by buildings on three sides, but with the buildings on the fourth side (housing 'art and craft' subjects) slightly separated from the others, up a set of steps. From the main reception area another small, bright reception area is reached through a set of doors that lead to the new, fully equipped drama studio. One has to walk away from the main reception area and main school buildings to reach the separate sports halls and changing facilities. At the time of the study some areas of the school were in need of redecoration, the areas filled with age-worn lockers being amongst the worst. Ofsted praised the PE facilities at the school, which I shall discuss in some detail shortly.

Although the school is in an area of England that is perceived as a 'leafy suburb', in reality it suffers from many similar problems to inner city schools, but

without the support that schools within an Education Action Zone<sup>39</sup> would receive. Census information found in the school's 1998 application for SSC

Status includes:

The highest proportional body of the population are skilled manual employees.  
25.8% of households have no car access.  
12.7% of households contain single parent families.  
Unemployment is 6.3%.  
In the catchment area, 60% of the housing is private, 40% rented.  
A high proportion of households receive free school meals. (p.10)

The result of their geographical situation is that Green Acre does not have all of the enticing benefits that an inner city school could offer potential employees, but does have many of the problems. Because of this there is a struggle to recruit and retain staff.<sup>40</sup> This staff instability has had a considerable effect on pupils in certain subject areas.<sup>41</sup>

Because of the incongruity between their geographical situation and the type of students that they deal with, the additional funding that Green Acre gains through subject specialism is something of a lifeline to them.

### ***Ofsted's view of Standards of Achievement***

The standards of achievement at the school were well below those of similar schools. Ofsted (2002) name the persistent problem of absenteeism as one of the reasons for this. In the school year 2001-2002, where the national average for unauthorised absences was 1.1%, Green Acre's average was 5.1%.<sup>42</sup> Ofsted (2002) did praise procedures that were being established to tackle attendance problems. In addition pupil mobility was an issue, as 38 pupils had left during the previous school year. Behavioural problems were also seen

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<sup>39</sup> Education Action Zones are usually inner city areas which are deemed as needing additional Governmental support in terms of funding.

<sup>40</sup> Information obtained from the current head in 2002.

<sup>41</sup> This is discussed in Chapter 5.

<sup>42</sup> The attendance, deemed unsatisfactory in 2002, was satisfactory in 1997.

as retarding an improvement in standards, with the school accommodating an above-average percentage of pupils who suffered with emotional and behavioural difficulties. In 1997 Ofsted described the behaviour of pupils at the school as “good and often very good” (p.12) but by 2002 behaviour was deemed “satisfactory” (p.8) adding that “poor behaviour is not uncommon” (p.9). Ofsted noted that “Pupils with challenging behaviour tend to be contained” (p.30, 2002). In the school year 2001-2002 there were 126 fixed period exclusions and 5 permanent exclusions. In 1996-1997 these figures had been 43 and 2 respectively. In 2002 Ofsted chose pupil behaviour as one of the school’s five primary areas in which improvement needed to be made. Other areas included the need for the involvement of the Governing body in school matters and the partnership between the school and home to be enhanced (p.7).

Ofsted 2002 state that the pupils that enter the school do so with *well below* average levels of attainment in English, maths and science. This poor standard perpetuates through Years 9 and 11, where results remain well below average. Standards of improvement are keeping up with the national rate in Year 9, but not in Year 11. The school’s levels of attainment still come out well below average when compared with similar schools (on the basis of free school meals). At around 12%, the proportion of children eligible for free school meals is seen to be average. Perhaps most importantly, though, the achievement of the pupils was better than would have been expected from the particularly low levels of previous achievement of that particular cohort.

In both 2001 and 2002 the school did not meet its own, realistic targets in GCSE examinations. The Ofsted Inspection Report (2002) suggested that this was partly because of the very high rates of absenteeism in that particular

group, but also that it might be connected to the narrow range of courses offered in Years 10 and 11 and the lack of vocational courses.<sup>43</sup> It was good to see in the school's 2003-2004 prospectus that this issue had been addressed, with a re-structuring of the curriculum that would offer more choices and a greater vocational element. In terms of GCSE results, PE was below average in 2002.

When Ofsted (2002) highlighted 'what the school does well', achievement in design and technology, history and information communication technology (ICT) were picked out.

### ***Governing Body and Parental Involvement***

In 2002 the Governing Body at the school was not viewed as an area of strength. The Ofsted report commented that, "the governing body still does not have a sufficiently proactive role in supporting and shaping the direction of the school" (2002, p.8). Comments from staff, and the small number of responses to questionnaires supported this. There was also no longer a Parent Teacher Association at the school, whereas in 1997 the PTA had been described as 'active'. In 1997 views on the involvement of parents had been mixed. The report stated that, "Parents, staff and pupils work together towards a shared moral code" (p.6 & 15) but later stated that "In general...the school finds it difficult to promote the partnership with parents" (p.16). By 2002 the statements were a little stronger. The 2002 document noted how, "parents make a limited contribution to their children's life in school" (p.23) and that, "The impact of parents' and carers' involvement on the work of the school is unsatisfactory overall" (p.26). Both reports refer to the small minority of parents and carers that

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<sup>43</sup> It is interesting that vocational courses, and opportunities post-16 were specifically named as areas of strength in the 1997 inspection report (p.4).

signed their children's weekly planners, the primary means of parents monitoring their children's progress.

## **4.2 The School culture**

Most of the strands that combine to form 'culture' are inter-related; it is rather a tangled mess. For ease of data management I have attempted to split these strands into broad areas. These areas are: the '*public face*' of the school, including the building, marketing and correspondence, the *staff structure* and sub-cultures within the school, including relationships and interactions, and the *priorities, expectations and belief systems* of the school. Obviously some of these were far less visible than others.<sup>44</sup> It is also notable that whilst discussing the school culture I omit two areas that are vital to my research question; the effect on the school of its specialist status and the school's approach to inclusion. This is because these two areas need fuller discussion, and so have been dealt with separately.<sup>45</sup>

### ***The 'Public Face' of the School***

#### ***The School Building***

The buildings were much as described by Ofsted, grey, cold and unwelcoming. The natural route to the main reception desk (used by the majority of staff and students) took you not through the new, bright and airy entrance, but through two sets of well used doors, past a stair well. Once reached the reception area was rather gloomy, receiving no direct sunlight. Many awards, newspaper clippings and pictures adorned the walls, but struggled to brighten it.

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<sup>44</sup> Another topic of interest here is the school's Ofsted inspection. But as it lacks direct relevance it can be found in Appendix K.

<sup>45</sup> It should be noted that during this data presentation I often refer to 'ethos', although my literature review has stressed that the term 'culture' is more appropriate. This is because in the early days of the research this was the term that I used to describe the 'feel' of the school.

When the 33 teaching staff that completed an in-depth questionnaire<sup>46</sup> were asked whether Green Acre was a pleasant school to walk into, it was very difficult to imagine that all of the comments could be talking about the same school. Seventeen staff (52%) answered 'yes' and the most common reason that they gave were the staff being friendly and welcoming and a pleasant atmosphere between staff and pupils. The office staff were also mentioned as a pleasant, welcoming face of the school. Seven staff (21%) gave answers such as 'generally' and 'in parts'. The state of repair of the buildings and some locker areas in particular were mentioned as 'blots'. One member of staff perceived an, 'us versus them' mentality (whether this was between staff and students, or senior management and staff, I am unsure) which spoiled the atmosphere of the school, and one thought that staff were too busy to be friendly. Nine staff (27%) thought that Green Acre was not a pleasant school to walk in to. The reasons that they gave were: litter, graffiti, untidy, dirty, vandalism, buildings in need of urgent attention, poor pupil behaviour, chewing gum, foul language and a 'frantic' atmosphere. School Governor's comments included that the school was a "Pleasant place to visit" but also that it was "Rather stark and in need of refurbishment".

As there was no time for me to be shown around the school as a researcher, I had to wait until I visited the school under the guise of 'prospective parent' at an open evening. This time there were smart boys and girls eager to take me on a guided tour. In the art and design block in particular I saw some stunning examples of pupil work on display. Unfortunately, whilst later visiting

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<sup>46</sup> This questionnaire (Appendix G) was completed by 33 out of 62 teaching staff. In all references to this questionnaire I have rounded percentages that are .5 or over up to the nearest percentage. This means that in some cases the totals of all percentages may be just over 100%. As this questionnaire is referred to many times, from here on I will refer to it as Questionnaire G.



lessons during pupil shadowing, I also saw displays that had been defaced. When the staff were asked about displays<sup>47</sup>, again, there were very mixed answers relating to their quality. Sixteen staff (48%) thought that there were interesting displays in *some* areas. One teacher mentioned that it was a struggle to keep 'on top of' displays, another answered that there are interesting displays "in some areas where they can be protected" and another that his area had interesting displays "until pupils destroy them".

### ***Marketing***

During events such as Open Evening and Prize Giving the main qualities of the school (as perceived by the Head Teacher) were outlined to parents in the speeches given. In the 2002 Open Evening the 'Unique Selling Points' of the school were given as:

- SSC Status
- The School Site
- Links Abroad
- A Community High School

It was stressed that the school links and collaborates with other schools, and that sport was only one aspect of the school. The fact that the school site was 'not finished yet' hinted that there were better things to come. Numerous links with foreign countries, and the fact that they were to hold a 'mini Olympics' next summer were viewed as great assets.

When the head teacher went on to highlight the aims of the school, a very inclusive school was portrayed. Mr Bennett stressed that the school's aims were:

- To enable all pupils to fulfil their potential
- To treat all pupils equally
- To encourage all pupils to achieve excellence

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<sup>47</sup> Appendix G.

- To foster community spirit

Mr Bennett's assertion that "equal opps features high on my agenda" was then reinforced when different images of the school were projected. The photograph of the girls' football team was displayed before that of the boys', who had become the National *Sports* Champions<sup>48</sup>, that year.

During the Prize Giving evening (2002) more was made of the school's sporting success by the head teacher, though the pupils, you will find, focused on more diverse areas:

The musicians played beautifully and then it was on to the Head teacher's report. This consisted predominantly of a detailed and long account of the School's victory at the ... National Finals. Sport, without a doubt, dominated the speech, hogging the lion's share of the time. When four pupils contributed their thoughts to the 'highlights' of the year, sport was not mentioned. Events such as biology field trips were seen as most memorable. A very impressive drama sketch by three 6<sup>th</sup> formers was also included... The ceremony was finished with a final speech by the last Head. He entered into some light-hearted 'one upmanship' with the present head comparing their 'successes' as SSCs. (271102)

The School Prospectus for 2003-2004 has '*A Specialist Sports College*' not as a sub-heading, but in letters as large as the name of the school itself. This time the sub-heading inserted is '*National Sports Champions 2002*'. The prospectus used the school's specialism to equate general excellence, and claims that, "Green Acre, through its Specialist Status, is expected to be at the forefront of educational initiatives" (p.5). It adds that:

Green Acre now has four staff within English, PE and Mathematics who are acting in Advisory capacities for the LEA. Staff are represented on national bodies, which is testimony to a programme of continued Professional Development and ultimately benefits the life chances of our students. (p.5)

During discussion with Mr Bennett he commented that one of the qualities of the school was that they strived to 'fit square pegs in round holes'. Through

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<sup>48</sup> Obviously this was not the original wording, which cannot be used as it would make the school easily recognisable.

partnerships, for example with football clubs and abroad, they attempted to accommodate the very diverse needs of their pupils.

The school web site, (accessed on 26/09/02), featured 'English Schools Sports Champions' on the homepage. Next to that was a link to the 'Physical Education Study Centre'. Also on the homepage were small links for 'e-mail' and 'clubs' and a larger one, encouraging pupils to use the Learning Resource Centre. There was a clear emphasis on sport. 'About Us' took you to the prospectus which started with "The Area's First SSC". In answer to the question 'What is happening in Green Acre in PE and Sport?' the first of eleven bullet points stated: "The school is succeeding in District, County and National competitions in a range of sports".

There were ten aims of the school stated within the website, starting with 'enabling all pupils to fulfil their potential' (75% of School Governors agreed that this was the most important priority of the school in response to their questionnaire, Appendix H). Interestingly, to 'foster competition' was fourth, above regular attendance and good behaviour, civic responsibility, extra-curricular opportunities for all and fostering a community spirit. In contrast the idea of 'competition' was seen as the *least* important of six statements when teachers were asked about their priorities at the school in their brief questionnaire, Appendix F.

### **Staff Structure**

At the top of 'tier one management' (or senior management) was the Head Teacher, then the Deputy Head, and then four Assistant Heads. Also included in this tier were the Head of Sixth Form, the Special Educational Needs Coordinator and the Director of Sport. The second tier of management, this time

named 'the management team', comprised of heads of faculty, Key Stage and year. In some cases these were also members of the Senior Management Team. Within faculties, there then existed further roles of responsibility, such as 'Head of Boys' and 'Head of Girls' PE within the PE Faculty, or Head of Art within the Design faculty. Many faculties also had a Deputy Head.

The relationship of the head with his staff appeared to be excellent. Despite the existence of fixed roles in Green Acre, a charismatic leader, as is found in almost all of the most successful schools <sup>49</sup> was also found. This leader showed unwavering support for his staff and constant encouragement in order to obtain the most from his workforce. Mr Bennett set the precedence by arriving early and working until late. I record:

I arrived just before 8am to a very empty staffroom. Just one or two staff milled about. Mr Bennett was already there (of course) popping in and out, and as he did so he exchanged light-hearted banter with the staff as they entered. (030702)

Mr Bennett certainly fit the role of leader in a person culture. He was always there, a pillar of support. He was caring and encouraging, firmly in touch with the 'real world' (which he would prove by references to every day news during briefings) and seemingly imperturbable. In fact, I only saw Mr Bennett agitated once during my visits, and that was when the LEA were attempting to pressurise him into accepting some statemented children at the school, whom he did not want.

When Mr Bennett asked about my illness, he actually seemed concerned. Although always burdened by varying pressures (in the following case Ofsted) he could always find time for people. The following was very typical:

After briefing, during what was obviously an extremely stressful morning for him, the Head still found time to meet with a Reverend and a Charity Worker for ten minutes. They had been at the sixth form assembly to explain the Charity Worker's

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<sup>49</sup> Rudd *et al* (2002).

operations in Portugal...After the meeting, the Head helped Ms Webb to carry out her box of books, as he went for 'a wander around'. (181102)

I did not observe any conflict between Mr Bennett and members of staff, but I was aware of frustrations caused by his lack of action in some cases. For example, one teacher had requested time to talk with Mr Bennett about promotion, and was very annoyed when, weeks later, this had still not been followed up.

Mr Bennett, rather than being a mechanical manager, was very human. He protected the staff's personal planning time prior to Ofsted, and after it insisted that they all go home early.

Then he said that the main, whole school feedback was being given to him between one and two and that at four he had ordered in some wine and nibbles and would give a ten minute version to the staff. He said 'It won't be any longer than that because I'm going home. And you are all under strict instructions to take everything home and go, get drunk and spend some time with your families again...' (221102)

Green Acre's deputy head, Mr Moseley had a quiet, rather introverted nature, and at no point during my research initiated a conversation with me. He appeared to favour the administration side of things whilst Mr Bennett dealt with the people. Mr Moseley was responsible for such things as finance and timetable management, and appeared to spend vast amounts of time working in his office. Mr Rogers, an assistant head, also seemed rather aloof. He and Mr Moseley seemed to interact with the other staff on matters of business only; I never saw them simply 'chatting'. The other members of the senior management all appeared to be confident and personable individuals and would regularly be seen in conversation with colleagues in the staff room.

I have already mentioned the fact that most teachers were not contractually required to meet more than once a week. Because of this a great deal of information was shared during morning briefings, but, due to the time

restrictions, this was not a forum for discussion. Most discussion took place within senior management meetings. Here the vast majority of decisions were made, which then filtered down to the other staff. Many staff were unhappy with this arrangement, and when they were invited to make any other pertinent observations at the end of the staff questionnaire (G), the following points were raised:

- 1) Middle managers (HoD/HoF) need to have more involvement in decisions, and to have a vision for whole school.
- 2) Improvements needed in the relationship between leadership and middle management.
- 3) Very low morale of staff.
- 4) Many staff leaving.
- 5) Some confusion about the roles of the Leadership team.
- 6) 'Us and them' between layers of management and others in department.
- 7) People feel that they're not contributing as much as they'd like.
- 8) The need to feel that contributions are valued.
- 9) Individual staff needing to feel valued, rather than being the recipients of information to be acted upon.
- 10) Little involvement of staff in decisions.

When staff were asked (in Questionnaire G) whether they felt that relationships between senior management and teaching staff were positive and productive, only seven staff, (21%), responded with an unequivocal 'yes'.

When asked whether they felt that the management of the school valued their opinion, 12 staff (39%) answered 'yes' and five (15%) answered 'no'. Nine (27%) gave answers such as 'some do' and 'in the main'. Six (18%) gave a little more negative response such as 'not particularly' and 'not at all times'. Two members of staff made the point that they felt that their opinions were 'listened to' but not actually acted upon. This seemed to be the case in the PE faculty, where the existing staff were repeatedly frustrated that the new Head of Department would not take on board their advice. But this still did not prevent them from pulling together as a team. My field notes record a conversation in the staffroom with Ms Williams during the week of the Ofsted inspection:

We then talked about the continuing problems in the PE dept stemming from problems with leadership and that although there is only one 'official' head of

department it is, in reality, very much a 'girls' PE' and 'boys' PE'. The Head of Dept appears to cause a great deal of frustration and annoyance in the other staff.

This was re-enforced when I went to 'check in' at the PE staff room at lunchtime. Ms White was there and the 'head of boys' PE' and they were talking about what a bad day the Mr Smith had had the day before. The general sentiment of the Head of Boys' was 'Look, I know that there's a lot a lot of problems and tension and that people are generally pissed off with him, but we all need to support each other in this. A bit of solidarity and all that.' When the Head of Department came into the office he was a little happier than yesterday and given literal and metaphorical 'slaps on the back' by the other staff. (191102)

Fifteen members of staff (45%) felt that the work that they put in at the school was valued by the management, with one adding that they were generally praised. Five (15%) answered 'no', they felt that their work was not valued. Eight (24%) answered with a more vague 'sometimes' or 'I like to think so'. Two Heads of Department felt that senior management did not take enough interest in what went on in their departments to value the work<sup>50</sup>. Two teachers commented that although they knew their efforts were valued they were rarely told so, and that, instead, it generally came across by their not being criticized.

The staff as a whole did not come across as overly friendly, as discussed in the 'Access' section, but the perceived coldness may have been in part due to the large turnover of staff at the time. At the end of the Summer Term, 2002, a teacher who was leaving (no reason was mentioned), gave a little speech and commented on how many 'new faces' there were these days. During September 2002 a newsletter went home that named eight new teachers and three new support staff. Twice during my time at the school I saw an assistant head using the staffroom phone to ring up for job applications at other schools. The same instability was also found amongst support staff. My fieldnotes record:

At 11:40 a cleaner and mum that I had spoken to before was in the staffroom. I had seen her earlier with the SEN team and asked had they finally found her some hours. She said yes, 15, but she was still doing her cleaner/ and dinnerlady jobs at the moment and it was too much. Apparently they are very short-staffed with dinner

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<sup>50</sup> Ofsted (2002) commented that although monitoring systems for teaching and learning were being established, they were not having sufficient impact because the heads of department were not fully involved.

ladies - only two are left and they are thinking of leaving. I asked why and was told that it's because staff are leaving and not being replaced, then the ones left are overworked. (261102)

During interviews two pupils described how the staff turnover looked from their perspective:

### **Mark (Year11)**

Carla: And when you look back on this school what do you think you'll remember most about it?

**Mark: Umm...probably the amount of teacher changes that I've had, because I had a form tutor, which you're supposed to have all the way through, and now I've got a different form tutor. And the way...I've had four music teachers now. Well, we had the main one, and she left for a year to work for the County, and then we had Mr Fellows and now we've got two on the go because one comes in on a Friday and one does the other days, so...all the teacher changes I've had, and the drama one as well.**

### **Will, (Y13)**

**Will: We have a lot of PE teachers coming and leaving...we have about one a week...**

Such instability would have made it difficult for productive relationships to be formed.

### ***Staff and Visitors***

During my time at the school I saw several sets of parents waiting in the main reception area to be ushered into an inner office, but I did not spot parents anywhere else in the school<sup>51</sup>. Meetings were formal and private. Parents had no visible, physical involvement with their children's schooling; and I witnessed no attempts to get them involved, other than through signing homework diaries and parents' evenings. When a questionnaire was sent home to parents by Ofsted in 2002, there was a high level of return (46%, it was 36.8% in 1997) and the overwhelming majority of responses were positive. Significantly though, the phrases that received a slightly lower percentage of positive answers were; "I

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<sup>51</sup> Apart from the mum who was also dinnertime supervisor and SEN support, as I have already mentioned.



am kept well informed about how my child is getting on” and, “The school works closely with parents” (p.39). In 1997, the phrases that received the lowest percentage of positive answers were: “The school handles complaints from parents well” and “I feel the school encourages parents to play an active part in the life of the school” (p.40).

When teaching staff were asked<sup>52</sup> whether they thought that parents were made to feel welcome at the school, all of those whom expressed an opinion said ‘yes’, mainly due to the friendly office staff. When the staff was asked for suggestions of how to improve the pupil behaviour at Green Acre (in Questionnaire G), one teacher answered “More contact with home, inviting parents into lessons. Encourage parental intervention”.

Though face-to face interactions happened rarely outside of allocated slots<sup>53</sup> I did observe a number of telephone conversations between staff and parents. Ofsted (2002) commented that, “Teachers do contact parents effectively when concerns arise, and they are increasingly doing so to give good news” (p.26). The calls that I witnessed were handled very diplomatically, and with care and sensitivity from the teaching staff. The teachers usually took the stance that the parent was right and stressed their support for the child. For example, at the end of one phone call, I record that the teacher thanked the parent for her responses and said, “That does explain a lot” (081002). Unfortunately, dealing with anxious parents was not always that simple. I recorded this conversation with a disgruntled parent:

‘Just to let you know that he took his sketchbook home and it was supposed to come back in the same state, he was not instructed to fill it, I don’t know where he got that idea...His grade at the moment is D to E...Why?...It’s based on GCSE standards. I have been teaching GCSE now for five years and

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<sup>52</sup> In Questionnaire G.

<sup>53</sup> For example Parents Evening.

have a pretty good idea of which level a child is at...Unfortunately effort is one thing and attainment is another...That's a fair comment...That's good...I would also say that he does need to settle down in lessons because he's often talking...You are quite welcome to come in and to meet up with the Head of Department...I feel that you're being a bit hard questioning my judgement...We have to be objective...'

...After the telephone conversation the teacher involved was ranting to a colleague about how she was fed up of parents questioning her judgement and that she hoped that she hadn't been rude. (181102)

The other visitors that I expected to see around the school, but did not, were school Governors. It appears that this was not the most pro-active of Governing bodies, and I did not see any of them come into the school during an average day. I had been told by a member of senior management at the school that they did not receive the support that they would have liked from their Governors, and this was reflected in the Governing Body's response to my questionnaire. Despite a reminder letter, I received eight out of 18 completed questionnaires from them. One Governor became irate that he might be identified by the questionnaire. The Governors' opinions about the 'feel' of the school can be found in Appendix J.

### ***Teaching staff and Students***

The use of humour was often favoured by the PE staff in order to build relationships with some otherwise very disinterested pupils. Having observed a number of PE sessions I reported that all of the teachers enjoyed a 'good rapport' with the pupils. This was not the case throughout the school, and one teacher's name was repeatedly mentioned in conversation with pupils as being particularly strict and generally disliked. I first observed her with the children during what was supposed to be a 'fun' sports quiz.

As the children came in the extremely stern teacher 'sat' them with constant remonstrances. When I heard her name it sounded familiar from the students' gripes in interviews. I could understand why. She gave persistent glares and 'shut ups'. (180702)

In the 1997 Ofsted report a great emphasis was put upon the caring nature of the school. It mentioned that pastoral care was one of the school's strengths (p.4) and the citation; "This is a school where the individual is nurtured and valued" (p.15), has since been used extensively on the covers of or within publicity materials. Although 'good relationships' between staff and pupils are mentioned in the 2002 report (p.9) there is not such an emphasis on a whole school culture. Though a caring nature can be inferred through the inclusiveness of much of the teaching, there are inconsistencies, as Ofsted note below:

In the more effective lessons, teachers place a great emphasis on meeting individual pupils' learning needs, and their overriding concern is to include everyone in what the various subjects have to offer. As a result, all pupils, irrespective of their prior attainment, are provided with many opportunities to make progress... Relationships between teachers and pupils were good overall, but there are inconsistencies. Where the teachers have the utmost regard for their pupils and have high expectations of what they can do...pupils of all attainment levels rise to the challenge, respond very well to this mature treatment, treat their teachers with real respect and produce work in which they have immense pride...In other lessons relationships are sometimes strained and teachers use inappropriate and disrespectful language towards pupils which does little to motivate them...  
(Ofsted, 2002, p.20)

The caring nature of the staff at the school was evident in the morning briefings when individual pupils and their personal problems, and how the staff needed to deal with them, were mentioned almost daily. Despite the severity of their timetable, 21 (64%) of staff that responded felt that they still had a chance to build good relationships with the children<sup>54</sup>, and friendly banter in the corridors between staff and students was not uncommon.

When thirteen Year Nine children were interviewed, they *all* said that they could talk to the teachers about their problems. Nine of the children (70%) said that they would feel comfortable talking to their teachers about personal as well as school problems. During the in-depth interviews with pupils from all year

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<sup>54</sup> In response to Questionnaire G.

groups, attitudes towards the teachers were very mixed. Below are some examples:

**Robert, (Y9)**

**Robert:** Um, the teachers, they don't give you a chance to talk if like you get in trouble and they just like blame it on you and that's it, they don't hear your side...

**Lucy, (Y9)**

Carla: Yeah? What do you not like about Green Acre?

**Lucy:** Hmm, the teachers.

Carla: What do you think the problem is with the teachers?

**Lucy:** They're just, I dunno, sometimes they're strict un...

... you think un...they could at the end of each lesson you could have like a chat with everyone and see what you want to do next lesson so you all get like a good education...

**Joanne, (Y9)**

Carla: If you knew someone that was coming to this school now what would you tell them about it?

**Joanne:** I'd say it's a nice school, that the teachers are nice and they work with you...

**Catherine, (Y9)**

Carla: Do you think that the students that don't enjoy school...if they took part in more physical activities that they might enjoy school more?

**Catherine:** Probably, but mainly they enjoy school by the teachers...there are some of these teachers which are horrible, they really are...

Carla: So that makes the main difference you think, the actual teaching?

**Catherine:** The teaching, yeah.

**Adele and Ellie, (Y13)**

Carla: It's not going to be long now...when you're looking back on this school after you've left, what do you think you'll remember most about it?

**Ellie:** People...

**Adele:** Yeah, and the teachers...

**Ellie:** I remember teachers who have got me through, like...

**Adele:** I've had some really good teachers in different subjects...

**Ellie:** And that's what makes you want to take those subjects on to A'level really...

During one Year 10 observation a pupil very deliberately said of the teachers within my hearing "I don't trust none of them. They're nice to your face then they stab you in the back" (p.36). Yet others, like Adele and Ellie (above) felt supported by the teaching staff.

## ***Peer relationships***

Though the usual squabbles could be found at this school, and some degree of bullying was evident, what consistently impressed me was a lack of vindictiveness in most of the pupils. During the lessons that I observed I did not see one pupil being put down because of a lack of skill. Early on in my observations I recorded:

... I've yet to see any nastiness towards children because of their poor ability. On the whole the children are patient and encouraging towards one another. I observed just this in today's dance lesson. It was a small group (10 students) and the quality on the whole was extremely high. They had learned a very complex dance and were practicing it. One girl in comparison to the others was very poor, yet no-one acknowledged it. All of the students were busy concentrating on improving themselves - and when the struggling girl complained at not being able to do it (frequently) two or three of the other students would give her words of encouragement. Though she obviously felt herself to be inferior, it was not reinforced by the other students in any way. (190202)

When the staff were asked<sup>55</sup> whether the pupils tended to be 'patient and encouraging' with the less able in their lessons, 18 (55%) answered 'yes' and four (12%) 'no'. Twenty-nine (88%) of the staff said that they encouraged such cooperation between their students. When the Year Nine interviewees were asked whether, on the whole, they got on well with the other pupils at school, only one answered 'no'. Nine pupils (70%) answered yes, the others answered 'most' or 'half and half'. During Sports Day sixth form students helped out with some of the earlier races and it was all done with supportive good humour:

...even with the small group helping out with these races, a very positive and encouraging spirit was shown. Those close to breaking records were cheered on by the sixth formers, and equally, those lagging far behind were encouraged to finish. Some jokes were cracked but nothing nasty, and I couldn't help smiling when they 'encouraged' one girl (obviously a smoker) to finish her race with 'come on... there's a packet of Malboro Lights in it for you.' (160702)

Some bullying did go on at the school<sup>56</sup>, and I did encounter some rather intimidating characters. When I interviewed the small group of Year Nine

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<sup>55</sup> In Questionnaire G.

<sup>56</sup> One only had to sit in on a morning's briefings to realise that this was a persistent problem.

children, five of the children had experienced some sort of bullying (not necessarily at Green Acre), over one third (38%) of this sample. In one case I was told that teacher intervention made no difference and the police became involved. I recall one observation when a boy was in tears because he had 'had enough' of the relentless teasing of a group of boys in his group. A teacher took the boy away to talk with him. In the General Information booklet that all pupils take home (in this case, the 2002-2003 version) the literature stresses that Green Acre is a "No Bullying" school and has an assertive policy against bullying.

### ***Pupil Behaviour***

The teaching staff's views on this area were particularly mixed. When asked for their opinion in Questionnaire G, 19 staff (58%) thought that pupil behaviour was a problem at Green Acre and four (12%) thought that it wasn't. For those who remained 'on the fence', phrases such as 'it can be' and 'for some' were used. Ofsted (2002) commented that, "Pupils with challenging behaviour tend to be contained" (p.18). Twenty-five suggestions were made from the staff relating to ways in which pupil behaviour could be improved. These are listed in full in Appendix K. From the sheer volume of these suggestions it would indicate that this was an area where the staff saw a great deal of scope for improvement. It is also worth noting the very different approaches suggested to tackling behaviour problems (for example inclusion versus exclusion) and the similarities. A number of the suggestions allude to a need for greater consistency within the approach to discipline from teaching staff. The need for stronger boundaries was brought up by two PE faculty members:

After this session I spoke with Ms Taylor and Ms Williams (who are both young teachers) for a little while about behaviour problems. They both feel that it is a real issue at Green Acre and one had been all set to leave at the end of her first year because of it. One asked if I had visited, and compared Green Acre to another SSC. She had done her teaching practice there and said that they had none of the behavioural problems that you encounter at Green Acre. There, she said, they have firmly set boundaries that the pupils do not overstep. They both felt that those boundaries were lacking at Green Acre. One told how she had been given a bottom English group for GCSE. They were almost all boys and their behaviour was horrendous. In addition she felt that English was a very weak subject for her. (150402)

Two of the issues above were touched upon by Ofsted (2002); they commented on the poor behaviour of pupils, (combined with a lack of attendance) holding back the pupil achievement; and they also mentioned the weaknesses of teaching where teachers are timetabled subjects outside of their field of expertise.

Some examples of poor pupil behaviour are given below:

...one girl, who had nothing wrong with her at all and had simply chosen not to join in, was a little peeved that she was not getting attention because of this. She wanted to be confronted, and when the teacher simply ignored her, said 'this one's a pushover'. (220402)

When all of the children (around 50) poured into the hall the behaviour was awful. There was running about kicking shoes off, shouting, fighting (kicks were flying), students were lying on the floor and there was a huge amount of swearing. It was mostly rowdy lads and a group of about 5 comparatively quiet girls. They talked right through the register. They were given a telling off by Mr Fielding who asked them why every lesson had to start with the same lecture. (130502)

After break a fire extinguisher was set off above the reception/ entry to the staff room. The staff were unable to stop it and it had leaked through the ceiling necessitating the lights being switched off before a caretaker came to the rescue. (080702)

In addition, two pupils mentioned teachers not being able to control their classes during their interviews.

### **Gareth, (Y11)**

Carla: Okay, and what do you like least?

**Gareth: About the school?**

Carla: Yeah.

**Gareth: Uh...I don't know, um , probably all the load of rowdiness and stuff as well, because a lot of the lessons aren't controlled at all. It's like, I really like biology, but we don't learn anything because there's a load of rowdy people in the class and stuff. And it's the same in chemistry, because they've got the new teacher and nobody listens to her and stuff, so that's kind of annoying.**

## **Helen, (Y13)**

Carla: If you knew someone that was coming to say, year 9 in September, what would you tell them about this school?

**Helen:** I'd tell them...it's a good school...but you need to think a lot about what's going on, because you need to start thinking for yourself. Because in science particularly, the teacher sat at the front of the classroom reading a magazine, while someone got into a gas...thing that sends the gas outside, and saw how many white coats it would take to fill it up...

One teacher confessed that she tended to ignore instances such as rudeness with the girls because this was favourable to the form-filling that would ensue otherwise. After one break-time a teacher was grumbling that he had spent twenty minutes writing out detentions for pupils who were 'off-site' during break, and that next time he would be tempted to 'turn a blind eye' (230902). During one month's morning briefings incidents such as attacks and bullyings, which resulted in suspensions, were mentioned sixteen times, exactly twice the number of mentions that sports related issues gained.

The fact that the fire alarm was set off on the first morning of the Ofsted inspection was no surprise to anyone at the school. Whilst staff and Ofsted inspectors waited patiently by the playground for registers to be taken, a teacher shared that there had been a spate of such pranks before, but the other pupils became eager to give the culprit up when he set off the alarm in the pouring rain.

## **4.3 The Impact of SSC Status**

The School Prospectus 2003-2004 has a half page *general* introduction, followed by two and a half pages devoted to a detailed report of the boys' team's success in the 2002 National Sports Competition. Within the Prospectus there are 22 pictures of extra-curricular physical activities. This compares to six showing the school's facilities, eight of students involved in arts activities, 12 showing field trips and visits abroad and one showing work experience. When



the prospectus discussed activities that have happened 'beyond the school bell' during the previous year, there were 18 sports-related events, five music, three art and three drama. When a sample of extra-curricular activities was listed, 11 PE based activities were listed before acknowledging 'other areas' such as 'General Band Practice.' Whether intentional or not, the elevated status of sporting activities was obvious.

When marketing the school its specialist status has been used extensively. On the cover of the Open Evening programme, October 2002, the name of the school, the school's status, and its football triumph were all presented in the same sized font. By the 2003-2004 Prospectus the school's status was incorporated into the school's title, in the same size font, and 'National Sports Champions 2002' had become the new sub-heading, representing the school's 'success' as a SSC. In case any visitors were not yet fully aware of the victory, it was recounted repeatedly, during Prize Givings and Ofsted Inspections, and was the main feature on the home page of the school's web site. But to what extent did the school's status really affect the day-to-day life of staff and pupils at the school? One member of the PE staff commented on the fact that most of the staff at the school were 'completely unfazed' by the boys team's success. This section attempts to investigate the impact of the school's changed status in more depth.

### ***The PE Faculty***

There were certain anomalies, such as the PE department's holding their own prize giving, separate to the one enjoyed by the whole school, which indicated that the PE faculty were somehow separate or different from other departments. This was strengthened by the physical separation of the sports

hall from the main school building, in which the PE faculty had their own, small staffroom, discouraging them from crossing to the 'other side', to the main staffroom. That the sports facilities were separate to the other buildings at Green Acre had always been the case, and was not a new SSC development. This segregation was mentioned by a pupil. When asked whether SSC Status had an effect on the whole school, Jenny (Y9) answered:

Not really...because it's like separate, it's a separate different building as well...the community use it in the night and we use it in the day and it's just 'there' really...

My primary area of investigation was the PE department, as this is where one would expect to see the most marked effects of the school's status. When my research began the impressive fitness gym was not yet built, and the building work caused some disruption. PE lessons took place in the basic sports hall, the worn smaller gym or the dance studio. Outside facilities were poor or not easily accessible. There was a pitted school field that became waterlogged after any rainfall, resulting in regular battles by PE staff over the tennis courts, which were used for all sports. In addition there was a gravel pitch, which, again, was pitted, and a very large rugby/ football field. These facilities needed to be reached by a five-minute walk, either crossing a busy road or taking the longer route under a sub-way.

The PE team were all enthusiastic teachers, but they were not the most organised of departments. One of my clearest memories of the sports block is the frequency with which students simply milled about; not sure where they should be, not sure whether they should have equipment, or waiting for teachers to appear. After early observations where I made allowances for things such as bad weather, I came to realise that a rather 'ad hoc' approach was the norm.

#### **Lesson 4 Y11 Boys Games**

Yet another disrupted lesson that was invented on the spot. Bad rain made the football/rugby pitches unusable and so at last minute it was decided that a group would do a fitness circuit and the rest would play football on the tennis courts.  
(050202)

Allowances did need to be made. When I started the research the Director of Sport also had the role of Head of Department and was waiting for a replacement. When Mr Smith arrived to take over as Head of Department, it understandably took him quite a while to 'find his feet'. But in the meantime some patience was wearing thin:

Dinnertime there was a team meeting, it started approximately five minutes before extra-curricular activities should have started.

In the afternoon I followed Ms Taylor again. She talked a lot about the lack of organisation in the department and unwillingness to change. Again she was taking the Junior Sports Leader Award group, the children were very unenthusiastic and it was a quite disastrous lesson. She said that she has to try to make the girls do work that they do not need to do because they are not actually taking the course. When Ms Taylor has tried to get advice/support about this from more senior members they've offered none. She feels totally unconfident about what she is supposed to teach and so can expect little from the pupils. She feels that she regularly 'gives up' because she is trying to fight for things that are unsupported by the basic framework of the PE department - for example structure in lessons. Ms Williams came to join the discussion for a while and we talked about the general organisation at Green Acre. Both remembered things being far more structured and organised in their own secondary schools. Both felt that they were 'victims' of the disorganisation rather than causes of it.  
(040302)

Frustration at the disorganisation of the new Head of Department grew when things failed to become more regulated. In Mr Smith's eyes, it would take around five years to get new structures into place in the PE department, but it was the small, everyday things, that were annoying his staff:

In their morning PE lesson (with certain years out of school, there was only one PE lesson all day) they had an 'it's a knockout' type activity. It was disorganised. Apparently the staff had one meeting to urge them to think up some activities and then were supposed to be meeting again to discuss who did what. The second meeting never happened. Mr Smith was all set to do the activities that he had thought up, but the other staff, though they had thought up some activities were a little lost as to what, exactly was going on.  
(150702)

At lunchtime a number of PE staff were complaining that they were the only department that had not yet had their timetables. Their exasperation with Mr Smith's disorganization was obvious.  
(180702)

There was some irritation amongst PE staff that a venue had not been arranged for Open Evening. It seems that in the past they have put on dance and gymnastic displays, but this year they were all in the I.T. suite for the duration. There is ongoing frustration with the Head of Department that although staff keep telling him

that things need to get done nothing gets achieved. My 'but he's such a nice guy' was met with 'but just crap at his job.' (021002)

Mr Smith could not possibly be blamed for all of the department's disorganisation, though. It simply seemed to be a common feature of PE teaching, with such problems as sorting out lost and forgotten kit every session.

Often disorganisation was a result of the irresponsibility of the students:

'Sports for All' afternoon was worse PE chaos than ever. Though the events had been adequately arranged, the pupils had taken little or no notice of those arrangements and repeatedly wandered into the sports centre saying 'where am I supposed to be?' The instructions that students had been given about collecting equipment were ignored, and, once again, everything had to be arranged on the spur of the moment. This resulted in Ms White, who had spent many hours arranging the events for the afternoon, becoming very frazzled. (160702)

On the same afternoon I recorded that certain games needed to be abandoned because of the student's poor behaviour, which was, no doubt, exacerbated by the confusion.

When I undertook a series of basic, structured lesson observations in PE, I found that when it came to 'feeding back' I was making excuses for the staff that had won my regard, because the notes looked far from impressive. The PE staff, were all extremely personable individuals, with a flair for teaching, who had a warm, fun manner with the children. All teachers enjoyed a good rapport with the pupils and adopted the appropriate tone and pace of the lesson to motivate them. Frequently an entirely unmotivated group was sufficiently enthused by the teacher to thoroughly enjoy the session. All teachers' knowledge of physiology was excellent and used regularly throughout the lessons, for example referring to various muscle groups and the impact that their activity would have on them.

Time management appeared to be a particular problem within the PE department:

In the P.E. staffroom, as I entered, they were discussing lunchtime activities. I took this as a prime opportunity to mention the 'time' issue. Their 'Clubs and Activities' poster claims that lunchtime clubs start at 12:45 and finish at 1:20 pm. In reality the staff have very rarely left the P.E. staffroom until 12:55 and the students are always hanging around waiting. I 'light-heartedly' suggested that the time on the poster be changed before Ofsted and asked 'Or are you actually planning to start the clubs at 12:45 that week?' At least two members of staff didn't even realise that the poster said 12:45 and commented 'Well my group knows that it doesn't start until 1'. Mr Smith's response was 'Oh yeah, I suppose we should.' It turns out that their method of preventing students coming in 'early' (or the correct time according to the poster) was to keep the Sports Centre door locked until 12:55. (241002)

There were also occasions where activities were not cancelled, although the teacher was unavailable, and so students changed and waited about for a teacher that did not turn up<sup>57</sup>. During student interviews one student recounted how she used to go to early bird activities but gave them up because the staff were always so late starting them. Helen (Y13) said:

I do have the time, it's just when we used to come for Early Bird sessions they're supposed to start at quarter to eight, but the teachers would get there about ten past eight. So by the time they'd opened up it's quarter past eight and you wouldn't be changed until twenty past...it was just a waste of time really.

This is not what one would expect from a centre of 'sporting excellence'.

### ***P.E. Lesson Observations***

The observation of 23 P.E. lessons took place during the Autumn Term of 2002. Seven members of the P.E. Dept. were observed for three consecutive lessons in order to follow the progression of skills. One member of staff was only observed twice. What I was particularly interested to see was how 'visible' specialist status was within these lessons. Were the pupils encouraged to extend their skills in outside clubs or to meet more people in extra-curricular activities? Were they encouraged to watch what they eat, or prompted to improve their fitness by joining the gym? Was a healthy diet and lifestyle discussed, just as a natural part of conversation, rather than a curriculum

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<sup>57</sup> On one such occasion I ended up taking a basketball session with a group of lads that were ready and waiting for a teacher. The Head of Department was unable to take the session, but had said nothing to the boys and had not arranged for any other teacher to cover the session.

influenced 'teaching point'? Was there a real 'buzz' about health, sport and fitness within the department?

I found that, on the whole, discussion about such things as health and fitness must be saved for the designated lessons on these subjects, because I did not witness them. In two of the 23 PE sessions the status of the school was mentioned, both times with reference to the PE qualification that all students would receive because of it. These were both theory lessons. At the end of the boys' theory session the staff encouraged them to take part in more extra-curricular activities. The teacher also asked for a show of hands from those pupils who had ever been involved in some sort of 'sporty' club and approximately one quarter put up their hands. On the whole PE lessons were unconnected to anything 'wider', outside of that lesson, or that skill. Physical education was a subject, not part of a healthy and fun life style.

The fact that the sessions were all Year 9's is significant. In the in-depth interviews that I recorded with students some referred to their awareness of health and fitness being highlighted by their GCSE or A level PE content. But my reasons for looking at all year nine lessons was that here the first impact would be made on the widest number of pupils. If this were not a positive experience then why would the students bother to maintain an interest in physical activity? How were these students being encouraged to develop life-long good habits?

The observations did not go quite as smoothly as I would have hoped as there were various disruptions to the timetable, these are noted below. In addition I am aware that some lessons 'begin' in the changing room, and, for

obvious reasons, I was only able to observe this portion of the lesson for the girls.

Of the 23 observed lessons:

3 (13%) were taken by **Initial Teacher Trainees**.

4 (17%) were '**covered**' by another P.E. teacher.

7 (30%) lessons did not follow the unit of work and were '**one off**' lessons due to disruption (e.g. wet weather, photos).

*This meant that only 40% of lessons were taken by the group's teacher on the planned activity.*

### ***Teaching Staff's Reaction to Specialist Status***

As well as views on the concept of a 'whole school culture' I was also particularly interested in how staff felt that the school's changed status had affected them as individuals. The specialist status of the school was not a topic that came up very often in general conversation (without my prompting) and most of the following data came from questionnaire. A brief questionnaire was sent out to all teaching staff in the initial stages of the research (Appendix F). This was an early attempt to elicit some perceptions of the school culture. When 22 (out of 62) staff responded to the question of whether Green Acre had a distinctive ethos, 15 of them (68%) said 'no'.

Of the seven staff that believed that there was a particular ethos at the school, four named caring as a major element of that ethos. Other factors mentioned were: healthy competition, sports culture, warm and welcoming, putting children first and co-operation for success. In the same questionnaire, when 14 staff responded to the question of whether SSC status had affected the ethos of the school, 10 (71%) answered 'no'. Of the four that answered 'yes', one mentioned the raised status of sport, one more focus and one a greater

emphasis on achievement. One comment was a criticism that there had been a decline in manners and social skills.

The table below, summarises results from Questionnaire G, which asked for a more personal response to the effects of specialist status. Out of interest I have separated out two distinct groups of staff as well as looking at them as a whole. One group contains the academic staff from whom we would *expect* positive support for the school's specialism (senior management and PE staff), and one those staff under no obligation to be supportive of it (Heads of Faculty and teachers from other subject areas).

<b>As an individual teacher have you benefited from specialist status?</b> <i>n=33</i>		
<b>YES</b>	<b>Don't know</b>	<b>NO</b>
All Staff		
11 (34%)	7 (19%)	15 (47%)
Senior Management (4) /PE staff (6)		
<b>9 (90%)</b>	1 (10%)	<b>0 (0%)</b>
Heads of Faculty (7) and other non-PE staff (16)		
<b>2 (9%)</b>	6 (26%)	<b>15 (65%)</b>

It is predictable that the six members of the PE department (including the Director of Sport) who responded to the above question all did so positively. Four gave the existence of their post, or the development of their area of responsibility as the reason. The other two mentioned professional development within their subject area. Of the other members of Senior Management, all of whom had presumably supported the school's quest for altered status, one answered that they didn't really know whether or not they'd benefited from the school's changed status, one answered 'yes' but gave no reason, one referred



to how an IT package had benefited her specialist subject area and one referred to reduced contact time, better facilities and training. But even within the PE department there were doubts as to how much of a difference their 'specialism' was really making. One teacher, whose post had been created through SSC funding, was concerned that the funding may not continue:

Ms Williams came for a chat and told me about a general 'moan' that she and two other members of the team had been having. They had been discussing the school's possible re-designation and all felt that it would not be re-designated. *They felt that there was nothing special enough going on at school which justified it regaining specialist status.* They admitted that yes, the Director of Sport was doing things in the community, but felt that *their department was no different from any other school's PE department.* (191102)

That PE staff gained from the school's changed status is obvious (for example, the appointment of the Sports Technician alone, through specialist funding, would have lightened their administrative workload), and one would expect senior managers to be supportive of whole school decisions, but this is only a fraction of the school's staff; I was particularly interested in the specialism's wider impact. The difference is apparent. Only two members of the 'other' teaching staff (two out of 23) felt that they had gained from the school's changed status. The reasons that they gave were being able to use the fitness centre, and that all areas benefited by the raised status of the school in general. It is worth noting that of these two, one added, that there was "some resentment at the preferential status of the PE/Sports Dept".

Those 'other' teaching staff and Heads of Department (6) who were not sure how or whether they had benefited from the school's changed status, made the following statements:

Apparently we would have less non-contact time if it were not for the extra staffing in the PE Dept. However, I have no proof of this.  
Next year planning to become a member of the gym.  
Work on Duke of Edinburgh scheme.  
Access to sports lessons.  
Would depend on future interview.

Of the 15 staff that felt that they had not really benefited from the school's changed status, ten added no further comment. The comments that were added are extremely relevant.

Facility-wise there had been some improvement, but no personal benefit at this point in time.  
Most money and staffing allowances go to the PE Faculty.  
Most staff remain untouched by the sporting specialism, the benefits are not made clear. As a 'sportsman' I feel that I could contribute more.  
The reverse.  
The specialist status is for sport other areas of the school feel second best.

The last two comments, in particular, require further research. In addition, when the staff were asked to comment on any thing else that they felt was significant<sup>58</sup>, three criticisms were made about the school's status. These were: that "Wider staff remain unconvinced about the benefits of sports college", concerns about "Sport promoting the 'yob' culture" and the "Pre-dominance of sporting and, therefore male achievement". Such negative sentiments also resurfaced during informal conversations with teachers. For example, it was a minority of staff from other subjects who helped out during Sports Day races, and from them there were repeated 'tongue-in-cheek' comments about how the PE staff had 'an easy time of it'. After one staff-room discussion with a group of non-PE staff I recorded:

Many comments were made about money being thrown away after new initiatives and that teaching on the whole was simply deteriorating. One teacher commented "there's no time for anything in this place". The quite outspoken view of one at the table was that the school's Specialist Sports Status made absolutely no difference to them, if anything it was detrimental. He continued that the school only has a finite amount of money and if it's all poured into one area then the rest of the school is inevitably missing out. The school, he felt had deteriorated. (100702)

Just before the above conversation another humanities teacher commented that 'he didn't feel that Specialist Sports Status really had any affect on the school at all' (100702). At the end of the second year of the school's

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<sup>58</sup> In Questionnaire G.

specialist status, this is a highly significant comment.

### ***The Student Perspective***

The most significant insight I gained into student life at Green Acre came from 23 in-depth interviews with pupils (11 male and 12 female). I was extremely lucky in that these students who had volunteered to be interviewed, as well as representing all of the year groups at the school, also reflected a diverse mixture of personalities and attitudes. The interviews were semi-structured, and, for various reasons the students were not all asked all questions. Therefore the percentages below add up to the number of students who responded to each question. The phrase SSC Status, used frequently, has been abbreviated to SSCS.

What type of school is Green Acre?		
Reference to SSCS		No reference to SSCS
6 (30%)		14 (70%)
Does the status make a difference to the whole school?		
Yes	Other	No
3 (13%)	5 (22%)	15 (65%)

I sought to discover how aware the students were of the school's status, by simply asking them the question 'what sort of school is Green Acre?' It was significant that when 20 students were asked this, only 6 made any reference to its SSCS. Four of these were a straightforward 'yes it's a SSC' but two were rather more cynical: Will (Y13) answered, "A SSC, I believe" and Helen (Y13), "It's supposed to be a SSC". The students that did not mention the school's status, gave answers along the lines of: "It's a good school" (Richard, Y11) or

“Like, a bit rough” (Robert, Y9). When the same group of students were asked whether they thought that the SSC status had an impact upon the whole ‘feel’ of the school, just three answered ‘yes’, they said:

**Michael, (Y11):** I think it does make a difference, I think they take sport more seriously than at other schools.

**Adele and Ellie, (Y13):**

**Adele:** Yeah.

**Ellie:** It does being PE students...

**Carla:** Yeah? In what way?

**Ellie:** All the new facilities they’re having built, they’re a lot better than they were. Though we’ll probably just miss out on a lot of them. Because a lot of them are starting in September... And some of the teachers as well, like having Ms Williams brought in, as a part of Sports Colleges, and she’s been brilliant with us with netball... we’re playing so much better...

**Carla:** Okay, you’re looking at this as ‘sports people’, but do you think it’s affected the whole school that it’s a sports college, or do you think it’s just centred on the Sports Department?

**Adele:** It’s a sort of pride, in a way, you know what I mean? To have that sort of name attached to it, really, it makes you sort of ‘stand out’...

When discussing the status of the school, many students would make reference to the *sports facilities* and I had to reiterate that I was referring to the impact on the *whole school*. To many students (and at least one member of staff) the new fitness gym exemplified the specialist sports status of the school. Fifteen of the 23 students felt that specialist status made no difference to the whole school, and responded with ‘no’ or ‘I don’t think so’. Most of these students did not expand on the topic, but from those that did some pertinent points emerged:

**Sharon, (Y11):** No, not really, it’s just that we get recognised as a SSC. It’s just got normal physical education and everything that other schools do, it’s just that we get recognised where they wouldn’t. If I was applying for a job as say a physiotherapist and it said that I’d come from a SSC it’d help.

**Robert, (Y9):** Not really, because you don’t have any more extra lessons or... it’s just the same as in other schools, but they said that it’s like we’ve got over a hundred different things to do after school, but I got here and I thought ‘well what’s there to do?’ You don’t hear nothing different, you just hear either football, basketball and hockey and sometimes rugby... I thought ‘right I’ll go there and I’ll get really good at sport, but it’s just the same as any other school, really.

**Amy, (Y9):** No, it just feels like (*middle school*), but just a bit bigger.

**Gavin, (Y9):** I don't think so, I think it's just a title. Because if you look at it, you haven't got extra lessons for sport or anything like that...if you looked at it and thought 'oh maybe they'll have extra...' but you don't, it's not...it's just a name...

**Gareth, (Y11)**

**Gareth:** No...because I have the same amount of lessons that I did, that I've always had, and because I came when it had started being a SSC, so it hasn't made any difference to me.

Carla: Do you think that it has any affect on the whole sort of 'feel' of the school?

**Gareth:** Umm...I've noticed they do a lot more work in the PE department, because they've got all the new stuff in, and there's not much work going on anywhere else, so I think they're concentrating more on the sports side of it.

Carla: So if someone asked you would you say 'oh yes, I'm lucky to be coming to a SSC' or not?

**Gareth:** Umm...probably not really, because I don't see anything different really.

Inevitably some responses were neutral, or at a slight tangent, or mixed positive and negative comments about the status of the school. Simon, Y10, commented that the title encouraged you to want to go to the school, but "then you come here, and they ain't got nothing for you to learn the sports with".

<b>Did what you'd heard about the school before coming refer to its SSCS?</b>	
<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
<b>4 (24%)</b>	<b>13 (76%)</b>
<b>When telling others about the school would you refer to its SSCS?</b>	
<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
<b>4 (17%)</b>	<b>19 (83%)</b>

As the table above demonstrates, as another indicator of the influence that the specialist status of Green Acre had in the community I asked the pupils what they'd heard about the school before they came. As many of their comments were based on the perhaps rather fictional creations of other students, I also asked the students what *they* would tell *others* who were coming to the school, or what they would remember most about the school. This, of course, applied to all of the 23 students. Four mentioned sport. Although six pupils had mentioned friends, nine had mentioned teachers, with a mixture of positive and negative

comments. Two of those pupils commented in particular on the turnover in drama teachers (one of whom has already been cited in the previous section).

Before the student interviews, which came towards the end of my data collection, I used student questionnaires to obtain overall views on PE, physical activity and fitness. In the autumn term of 2001 these were given to the entire Year 9 intake, with the hope of comparing their views one year later, after a year at a SSC. I opted to use a sample second time around, for ease of data management, but this became smaller than planned when a number of questionnaires were not returned (I only obtained 70 completed Y10 questionnaires<sup>59</sup>). Because of this, as mentioned previously, I have compared all of the sample's results with the whole Year 9's results in order to assess how representative they are. The results indicated that by the time these students had reached Year 10, some of them had a more negative attitude towards physical activity than when they started at the school.

Table 1 <i><b>How much do you enjoy physical activity?</b></i>						
	<i><b>At home</b></i>			<i><b>At school</b></i>		
<u><b>(All boys)</b></u>	Y9 All	Y9 Sample	Y10 Sample	Y9 All	Y9 Sample	Y10 Sample
Not at all	2%	0%	5%	2%	0%	5%
A little	8%	7%	12%	22%	17%	17%
<u><b>(All boys)</b></u>	Y9 All	Y9 Sample	Y10 Sample	Y9 All	Y9 Sample	Y10 Sample
Quite a lot	27%	37%	33%	29%	29%	33%
A lot	63%	56%	50%	47%	54%	45%

If we look at this boys' sample (Table 1), which was fairly representative of the year group as a whole, we see a trend towards pupils losing a little of their

<sup>59</sup> Obviously, in retrospect I would have re-administered all of the questionnaires and just take my sample from the respondents, rather than only giving out a sample of questionnaires. The Year 9  $n=240$ , 131 boys and 109 girls, the Year10  $n=70$ , 41 boys and 29 girls.

enthusiasm about physical activity. Although there is one exception in the group's results, with the number of boys stating that they like physical activity 'Quite a lot' increasing by 4%, this has been achieved by the drop in 9% of those claiming to like physical activity 'a lot'. Where there was a 5% increase in boys who had decided that they did not enjoy physical activity 'at all' at school, there was a 17% rise in the girls (Table 2).

<b>Table 2 <i>How much do you enjoy physical activity?</i></b>						
	<b><i>At home</i></b>			<b><i>At school</i></b>		
<b><u>(All Girls)</u></b>	Y9 All	Y9 Sample	Y10 Sample	Y9 All	Y9 Sample	Y10 Sample
Not at all	3%	3%	21%	4%	7%	24%
A little	31%	28%	24%	35%	31%	38%
Quite a lot	41%	41%	48%	39%	45%	34%
A lot	25%	28%	7%	22%	17%	4%

Here the girls are over three times more likely to say that they don't enjoy physical activity at school at all (a jump from 7-24%) after a year at a SSC. And are over four times less likely to say that they enjoy it 'A lot'. This increasing negativity was reflected in other responses. For those who really enjoy physical activity there is a substantial difference between the boys and the girls, which demands more in-depth research.

In order to gain the students' perceptions on how much the adults in their environment enjoyed physical activity, the students were asked about their form tutor. The results are shown below.

<b>Table 3 <i>How much does your form tutor enjoy Physical Activity?</i></b>		Y9 All	Y9 Sample	Y10 Sample
<b><u>All boys</u></b>				
Not at all		19%	11%	21%
A little		40%	47%	47%
A lot		41%	42%	32%

Table 4 <b><i>How much does your form tutor enjoy Physical Activity?</i></b> <b>All Girls</b>	Y9 All	Y9 Sample	Y10 Sample
Not at all	8%	11%	32%
A little	52%	41%	39%
A lot	40%	48%	29%

After a year at the sports college the boys are almost twice (Table 3) and the girls almost three times (Table 4) as likely to say that their form tutor does *not* enjoy physical activity at all. Although with the boys this brings their views more in line with the overall Year Nine response, the girls started with a fairly representative view. Theoretically (allowing for teacher mobility), the students are *supposed* to retain the same form tutor from year to year. This raises the question of why the girls' negativity has increased more rapidly than the boys'.

A slight increase can be seen in the number of boys that do not attend any extra-curricular activities after a year at the school (Table 5). Although there is also a drop in the number of students attending 1, or 3 or more activities, this is balanced out by the significant increase in those attending two activities.

Table 5 <b><i>How many extra-curricular activities do you attend?</i></b> <b>All boys</b>	Y9 All	Y9 Sample	Y10 Sample
0	49%	41%	44%
1	27%	32%	24%
2	13%	10%	27%
3 or more	11%	17%	5%

Table 6 <b><i>How many extra-curricular activities do you attend?</i></b> <b>All Girls</b>	Y9 All	Y9 Sample	Y10 Sample
0	42%	31%	45%
1	30%	31%	31%
2	18%	21%	10%
3 or more	10%	17%	14%



With the girls, the results are more concerning (Table 6). Here we see a significant drop in attendance overall, with a rise from 31% to 45% of the sample attending no extra-curricular activities by the time they have reached Year 10. A random sample of 55 Year 11 students suggested continuity in attendance decline, with the exception of Y11 boys attending 3 or more clubs.

After a year at a SSC the sample of boys were more likely to say that their school taught them that PE activities were good for them 'a little' and less likely to say 'a lot' (Table 7).

Table 7 <i>School teaches that PE activities are good for you:</i> <u>All boys</u>	Y9 All	Y9 Sample	Y10 Sample
Not at all	2%	0%	0%
A little	16%	17%	24%
Quite a lot	49%	46%	49%
A lot	33%	37%	27%

Table 8 <i>School teaches that PE activities are good for you:</i> <u>All Girls</u>	Y9 All	Y9 Sample	Y10 Sample
Not at all	0%	0%	4%
A little	20%	11%	21%
Quite a lot	53%	64%	54%
A lot	27%	25%	21%

A more significant difference could be seen with the girls, with a combined rise of 14% in those likely to claim that the school only taught them that that PE was good for them 'not at all' or 'a little'; and the same drop in the claims that it taught them 'quite a lot' or 'a lot' (Table 8).

Though these results would suggest increased cynicism, when the same sample of students reached Year 10, they are also more likely to say that they really enjoy school. With the boys the difference is slight, whilst there is a 3%

increase in those that do not enjoy school at all, there is a combined 5%

increase in those that enjoy or really enjoy school (Table 9).

Table 9 <i><b>How much do you enjoy school? (All Boys)</b></i>	Y9 All	Y9 Sample	Y10 Sample
Not at all	16%	17%	20%
School's okay	71%	63%	55%
I enjoy school	12%	20%	23%
I really enjoy school	1%	0%	2%

Table 10 <i><b>How much do you enjoy school? (All girls)</b></i>	Y9 All	Y9 Sample	Y10 Sample
Not at all	8%	10%	18%
School's okay	71%	69%	48%
I enjoy school	17%	17%	24%
I really enjoy school	4%	4%	10%

And with the girls, although there is an 8% increase in those that do not enjoy school, there is a 13% combined increase in those that enjoy or really enjoy school (Table 10). Therefore the increased cynicism towards physical activity does not appear to be representative of general views.

### ***School Policy***

In September 2002, when I worked through the 54 school policies that were made available to me, many were undated and some dated as far back as 1994. These policies were due to be updated for the upcoming Ofsted visit, (and so probably look quite different now) but I was eager to see them in their present state, two years into SSC Status. In the policies relating to: admissions, careers, the school prospectus, attendance, off-site education, in-service training, marketing and equal opportunities, all of which would have been effected to a greater or lesser extent by the school's new specialist status, the specialism remained unmentioned. In terms of whole school policy the school's specialist sports status had had no discernable impact.

### ***The Specialism and the Community***

The overriding impression was that the school's specialist status had a significant impact on *certain* pupils at Green Acre and beyond the school gates, but not on the majority of pupils within it. Groups of students were regularly taken out of the school to take part in 'community' activities, particularly within Green Acre's feeder schools, but even then attitudes were mixed. A multiple-choice questionnaire was sent to the PE co-ordinators of Green Acre's feeder schools in order to assess the impact that the school was having on its 'pyramid' (Appendix E). The pyramid of schools is the group of middle and first schools that the SSC takes under its 'umbrella'. Six schools replied and all were aware of the changed status of Green Acre. Though one of the schools obviously had extensive interaction with the school, resulting in training, resources and more general support, the other five schools felt that the changed status of Green Acre had had no real affect on their school. Four had been offered some training, but there had been no further interaction.

Question	Yes	No	Not sure
<b><i>Were you aware that Green Acre had become a SSC?</i></b>	6	0	0
Have they offered your school any training?	4	2	0
Have they offered your school any resources?	1	5	
Have they passed on any useful information?	1	5	
Have Green Acre staff been to visit you?	1	5	
Has Green Acre's changed status had any real effect on your school?	1	5	
Do you require any training that you feel Green Acre could supply?	3	1	2

The training requirements were specified, and fed back to the Director of Sports. The results, which seem to suggest that only one school was benefiting from the school's changed status, do not appear to tie in with the fact that Ms White was out of school often, organising Millennium Volunteers in events such as the 'mini Olympics'; or with the fact that strategies to boost PE in middle and

first schools were a regular feature of Sports College Management Meetings (SCMM). These meetings involved senior staff from the school, representatives from the LEA, staff from partner sports colleges, staff from sporting organisations and government funded sports colleagues. I was invited to attend the meetings, which struggled to retain a high attendance.

I used minutes from seven SCMM meetings and four 'updates' that accompanied them (ranging from October 2001 to January 2004) to search for references directly relating to improving the quality of PE experience *for all pupils at Green Acre*, or to improving their health and fitness through physical activity. This could be within PE lessons or outside of allotted time. I numbered each issue raised; this did not necessarily respond to 'bullet points' as outlined on an agenda, as one bullet point sometimes referred to several issues, or one issue could cover several bullet points. In all, 147 issues were discussed during those meetings. Often one issue was mentioned two or three times in separate meetings, and I counted each mention separately as an indicator of its importance.

Other than improving facilities at the school, which was mentioned ten times, the vast majority of issues tended to relate to activities involving a very small minority of pupils (particularly those talented in sport), e.g. Millennium Volunteers, to staff training or to partnerships with feeder schools and organisations outside of the school. Benefits for the majority of pupils at Green Acre, perhaps taken for granted, were rarely mentioned. There was one mention of the introduction of specialist classes, such as yoga, for a nominal charge<sup>60</sup>, but this was the closest that the discussions came to directly tackling the health

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<sup>60</sup> I was disappointed that the only mention of a 'non-sporting' fitness activity for the children was mentioned as something that they would need to be charged for.

and fitness of pupils at Green Acre. Not once was this directly mentioned, compared to the fact that Gifted and Talented children were mentioned 8 times, and supporting feeder schools was mentioned 22 times.

Another ramification of Ms White's involvement outside of the school- was her difficulty in dissociating what she was implementing elsewhere from what was going on within the PE department at Green Acre. For example it was very difficult for her, having brought in the policy within the local area that all students should change into kit, whether participant or not, to then accept that it was not going on within her own school. Despite a great deal of nagging from female staff it took a while for Mr Smith to 'decide', as head of department, that he would purchase spare kit for the boys.

A significant conversation occurred during Ofsted week. When I asked Ms White whether she had been spoken to yet in her role as Director of Sports, she answered "Yes, but the SSC thing is such a tiny bit of the PE that I only spoke to the inspector for about ten minutes" (221102). It is difficult to comprehend how something that incurs such massive monetary input, and which is supposed to change the entire culture of a school, can, in the next instance, be regarded as insignificant. She added, "I had a longer talk yesterday with the inspector that is interested in the community side of things. That was good" (221102).

#### **4.4 Inclusion or Excellence?**

Attempts were made to acknowledge the children's achievements in truly inclusive ways, as exemplified below:

The sports quiz was interspersed with 'talent spots.' There were two dancers, cousins, who were, individually very good dancers and were able to perform some very complicated moves...It was brilliant to see Elizabeth, a wheelchair-bound student who doesn't usually speak much, get up and do a solo. Her microphone didn't work and you couldn't hear her too well, but most of the students watched

intently...The Year 9s performance finished with four very unlikely lads doing a dance... the dance was a very 'tough' dance all based around fighting, and was excellent.

Year 10

For the first 'talent spot' a rather nervous looking girl sang 'all that jazz' unaccompanied...The second spot was a solo electronic organist...The final 'talent' really was impressive, two little dots of lads playing the guitar and drums. They were extremely talented and thoroughly enjoyable.

### **End of Year Assembly**

This was an assembly of 'well done's'. ...

First awards to be given out were attendance awards. All those with exceptionally high attendance were given certificates. The irony did not hit me until later that the certificates were sponsored by McDonalds and included a food voucher. So much for promoting health and fitness! The second certificates were commendations for hard work. These seemed to mostly go to poorer children who had tried hard (who also received McDonalds vouchers)...

Next was the allocation of House awards, and the children do seem to have quite a strong sense of house identity. It was repeated that the children received housepoints simply by taking part and that winning was not the most important thing.

(180702)

It was not unusual for assemblies and other communal celebrations to make time to showcase the children's efforts, and the children did appear to have respect for talent, but in a detached way, they did not seem to relate it to any effort of their own.

It appeared that the competing concepts of inclusion or excellence had not really been considered before my arrival at the school. Questioning the approach that they took to PE and to sporting activities was something of a novelty to the staff involved; as it is rare that one stops to question the motives for everyday actions. As an abstract notion it was something that really interested a number of them. When the new Head of Sport arrived we discussed these concepts as something new, and whilst I chatted with him during one of his sessions we debated the possibility of concentrating on participation within school, but having firm 'outlets' in place to direct talented children to.

As with SSC Status, the first place that I went to investigate the approach to inclusion and excellence was in PE lessons. My intentions were to discern whether the sessions were accessible to students of all abilities and

whether special measures were being taken to include the least able, and to draw on the talented. In the School Prospectus 2003-2004 there is a statement under the Physical Education heading which is added in bold italics. It states: ***enabling all to learn, teach and participate to the extent of their abilities.*** I intended to discover whether this was an accurate reflection of the culture that I experienced within PE lessons. During these observations I looked at how the children were grouped, how tasks were differentiated and how children responded. The most important results are expanded on below.

### ***Inclusion in PE***

Field notes from PE lessons include:

Some pupils liked the mud and some didn't! Some pupils got stuck in and some just wanted to keep clean.

*Only one or two did not join in and some complained about the cold (those doing least). One boy actually had a mild case of hypothermia by the time we got back in doors. He could not stop shaking and had to be fed biscuits and hot squash by the PE staff.*

So how is it possible to ever make the cold, wet and mud that is sometimes PE appeal to all?

Many of the lessons (14, 61%) involved team sports but it was rare that the pupils were really encouraged and taught to work *together*, other than with a token mention of 'good pass'. Eight sessions saw pupils working in teams with no encouragement to interact appropriately, often resulting in one or two players dominating (and on some occasions being praised for their *superiority* to the other players). There was the issue of those with the most need being most neglected, as was discussed earlier (p.71). In one lesson they were encouraged to work as a team after the activity had finished.

During a football lesson the teacher tried to encourage the boys to work as a team, though some remained unresponsive. One particular individual tried

to dominate his team completely. That was fine when he was winning - but then he began to blame other players when they were losing. A sixth former was helping out with the session (because a female was covering the session and he was recognised as a talented footballer) and he joined in with the poorest team when they were losing badly. He kept attempting to encourage the less able players with 'come on little man'. Into the first game the teacher stopped the teams in order to instruct them to make up a celebratory 'dance' when they scored. They were not playing as a team and the hope was to encourage them to pull together. Most of the teams took this in the fun manner that it was intended. At the end of the session the teacher brought the teams together to ask *why* they thought she'd asked them to make up a dance. Answers varied from "coz you're a dance teacher and you like dance" to "so we wouldn't be bored". When the teacher said that it was something that they could all get together and do as a team, the boys were genuinely surprised. That reason had not occurred to them.

On another occasion the teacher split the boys into two groups so that each group were all of a reasonably equal ability. One group consisted of the more able football players, and the other group of players that struggled. Each group then split up into two teams to play. During this session the boys enjoyed the team play far more, even though the poorer players were embarrassed at first to be put into the 'inferior' team. When the teacher asked the students why they thought that they had been split this way, a pupil responded, "Because they're all good football players and we're crap". As they went off to start their games the same boy commented: "Okay, let's play in these crappy fair teams".



Many other notes that were made during these observations refer to students being 'left out' or certain players dominating; these include:

- One pair ended up 'ousted' from their court and were just 'hanging about' for five minutes or so. They had to ask the teacher to get them back onto the court.
- Obviously 'netballers' had most success, but all girls played a role.
- All pupils were very able in warm up, but games inevitably became dominated by a minority. 2 to 3 players stood out in the final game.
- A few girls dominated the game with some hardly touching the ball. The girls had sorted themselves into teams, so they were very unbalanced.
- Some players wandered about with their hands by their sides or in their pockets for a large portion of the 10 minute game. Some obvious 'footballers' dominated the game.
- They played as a 'team' for the next 15 minutes - though they were not actually encouraged to work as a team, it was mostly dominated by one or two players on each side...All appeared to enjoy the session, though some took part a great deal more than others.
- (*Which pupils experienced success?*) Those with 'netball' skills. Some kept well away from the ball!
- All joined in well, though some looked a little embarrassed by their inadequacy.

Although the six PE staff that completed Questionnaire B claimed that they were all able to ensure that pupils experienced some kind of 'success' in their subject area, this was not clear in all of the lessons. For some students there was nothing to be gained from these lessons. Should we still be expecting to see these types of lessons in a school that has been picked out in order to develop excellence in this area?

### ***Extra-curricular Activities***

It was difficult to decide what, exactly, the aims of extra-curricular physical activities were in terms of inclusion or excellence, and I think that they differed with the individual teacher. When I looked at the 'PE Faculty Handbook'<sup>61</sup> the Extra-Curricular section was particularly interesting, it said, "It is our aim to offer

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<sup>61</sup> The Director of Sport actually told me that I should ignore this as it was no longer relevant, but there did not yet exist a substitute for it.

a wide range of activities accessible to all our pupils. The programme includes clubs and team practices”. But then all of the rest of the details appear to be geared toward competitive team sport, referring to ‘criteria for selection’ and ‘team managers’. In the ‘Competitive Play Policy’ it states:

The department recognises the role of competitive sport and activities. It values the role of school teams, not just in their successes, but in the spirit of competition and taking part in sport. The **team managers** (*my emphasis*) should reflect this attitude. It is hoped that the pupils may benefit from the sense of pride they may gain from representing the school.

Then after two more long paragraphs about competitive sport it adds “The PE dept takes an active part in the Inter-House Competitions and aims to encourage participation and enjoyment in a number of activities”. The formatting of this makes it almost appear to be tagged on in order to justify the exclusive nature of the other team sports. In terms of selection it says: “Teams should be selected on ability, reliability and availability. Regular attendance at team practices should be criterion for selection”. It is difficult to untangle whether the extra-curricular clubs are really ‘team practices’, or whether ‘team practices’ are something that happen as well as, or within, existing clubs.

When I interviewed 13 Year 9 pupils, only one of them believed that you had to be good at the sport in order to go along to extra-curricular clubs. When the Head of PE was still relatively new to the school I discussed extra-curricular activities with him. He had not really considered whether the aim of extra-curricular activities should be inclusion or excellence. He confessed that in his last school there had been quite an elitist approach to extra-curricular PE activities, with basic skills being covered in PE lessons and advanced skills developed in extra-curricular.

When I observed extra-curricular activities the vast majority of clubs were just for the improvement of personal fitness and fun. The fitness clubs, with the use of modern equipment and MTV were by far the most consistently well attended<sup>62</sup>. With other clubs there was a great deal of variation. Only two of the sessions (netball and basketball) seemed at all competitive or team-oriented, but it seems that other clubs were also deemed as being 'for the team', as the interview below, with Brian, indicates:

**Brian, (Y10)**

Carla: Do you go to any clubs or anything at school or is it all outside school?

**Brian: Just the school football club.**

Carla: So do you think that because there are so many activities going on, that you've been tempted to go and try more things, or not?

**Brian: Um, yeah but, they keep the same team, they don't like bring new people in, they've got one team that they like the teachers, people the teachers like, and they stick with that team...Like in the lessons, I'll go into a lesson and I'll go to one of the lads that I'm not playing on Tuesday, or something, on the football team, and they'll turn a round and say 'well I might have a chance of getting in there then'...**

Attendance at many of the clubs was poor. When the new Head of Sport arrived at the school he was amazed at the lack of response made to his setting up a boy's basketball club. He had already set up a fixture and wasn't sure that he would have enough boys to attend (040202). Part of the reason may well have been inaccessibility. In the previous extra-curricular session that I had observed, there were a dozen larger, more confident boys playing a game with two male members of staff. It would have been totally intimidating to beginners. But when I started a girl's basketball club, especially aimed at beginners, no girls attended the first session of that. I would have felt offended had it not been that no boys turned up for basketball the same day, either. One of the members

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<sup>62</sup> Over two weeks I observed and made notes on 20 different early bird, lunchtime and after school activities. Two of these, though on the activities list, had been cancelled due to lack of interest. Of the remaining 18, seven clubs had 9 or less pupils attend. Seven had between 10 and 19, two had 20-29 and two had more than 29. It is noteworthy that the four clubs with highest attendance, were all non-competitive activities.

of the PE faculty commented that children didn't tend to go to any extra-curricular activities unless encouraged by 'a big stick'. The Director of Sport vehemently disagreed with this, but would not let me look at attendance figures in order to clarify.

The new Head of Department mused over the possibility that one of the school's teams being involved in a national final, and an extremely prestigious event, might have an overall impact. He wondered whether their showing themselves to be 'excellent' at something, would improve overall participation and, therefore, raise overall standards. Apparently this is what had happened in his last school, where the focus of excellence was rugby. Of course there was always the possibility that it would have the opposite effect; that being a member of a school team would appear to be an unobtainable goal. To boys especially, it seemed that belonging to the team strongly influenced attendance at extra-curricular activities.

The numbers for the following results, extracted from the Year 9 Sports Questionnaire, were: Girl team-member  $n=31$ , Girl non-team-member  $n=78$ , Boy team-member  $n=70$ , Boy non-team-member  $n=59$ . The first question (Table 11) simply asked the pupils how much they enjoyed physical activity at home and in school.

Table 11 <i>How much they enjoy physical activity (At home)</i>	Girl team	<b>Girl non-team</b>	Boy team	<b>Boy non-team</b>
Not at all	3%	3%	0%	3.3%
A little	13%	39%	4%	13.3%
Quite a lot	23%	48%	16%	40%
A lot	61%	10%	80%	43.3%

<b><i>How much they enjoy physical activity (At school)</i></b>	<b>Girl team</b>	<b>Girl non-team</b>	<b>Boy team</b>	<b>Boy non-team</b>
Not at all	0%	5%	0%	5%
A little	16%	43%	11%	34%
Quite a lot	42%	38%	23%	35.5%
A lot	42%	14%	66%	25.5%

The most discernible difference can be seen in the 'a lot' choice. It is those that really enjoy sport that get involved more. Is this just genetic, or can anything be done to make physical activity more universally enjoyable? A clear difference can be seen with the girls, that if they belong to a team, they are nearly three times as likely to do something active in the evening (Table 12).

<b>Table 12 <i>How the previous evening was spent</i></b>	<b>Girl team</b>	<b>Girl non-team</b>	<b>Boy team</b>	<b>Boy non-team</b>
Did something physically active	55%	19%	50%	31%
Physically inactive	45%	81%	50%	69%

The following table (Table 13) refers to any clubs attended the previous week. The non-team boy's lack of involvement in any organised activity outside school is particularly evident.

<b>Table 13 <i>Attend clubs outside school?</i></b>	<b>Girl team</b>	<b>Girl non-team</b>	<b>Boy team</b>	<b>Boy non-team</b>
All clubs	77%	40%	64%	10%
Physically active clubs	71%	30%	57%	8%

The students were asked whether they attended any lessons outside school (Table 14). Those involved in a team were over three times more likely to attend a lesson of some description outside school time.

<b>Table 14 <i>Attend lessons outside school?</i></b>	<b>Girl team</b>	<b>Girl non-team</b>	<b>Boy team</b>	<b>Boy non-team</b>
All	52%	16%	37%	10%
Physically active	48%	5%	30%	7%

When it came to attending extra-curricular activities at school, the response from the boys who were not in a team was notable (Table 15).

Table 15 <i>How many extra-curricular activities do you attend?</i>	Girl team	Girl non-team	Boy team	Boy non-team
0	26%	50%	21%	80%
1	29%	31%	40%	12%
2	26%	14%	20%	5%
3 or more	19%	5%	19%	3%

It is the proportion of students that attend no extra-curricular activities that is most concerning, especially with regard to the boys. Through interviews it came across that some still felt that extra-curricular activities were really 'team training'. Tom (Year 12) said this:

Carla: Do you think that getting involved in clubs and activities would make people enjoy school more, if they got involved more...

**Tom: Yeah, because like Joe, he did rugby, and then the teachers start coming up to him and congratulating him and just start talking to him about it. But teachers as you are, if you just keep quiet and don't do sports they do tend to ignore you...not in a nasty way, but they do...**

**They just don't get to know you as well do they?...It's that getting to know people outside of lesson time, pupils and teachers...**

Carla: Do you think that people that do more sports are generally happier, healthier people?

**Tom: Uh, yeah, I think so...**

Carla: Why do you think that is?

**Tom: I don't know, 'cause...probably getting back to knowing the teachers... especially the sport ones, I mean, if they're a bit healthy then they'll play in the teams, then they'll get to know the teachers better and then the teachers'll praise them more...**

Carla: Better relationships formed...

**Tom: Teacher's pet kind of thing...(Both laugh)**

Carla: Is that what you aspire to?

**Tom: Oh yeah, 'why are you not doing your homework? Because you're on the team'...**

For Tom, the status gained from being part of a team, was far more important than the enjoyment of doing that activity.

A truly inclusive arrangement that had happened as a direct result of Specialist School funding was that the one wheel-chair bound pupil at the school was given one-to-one physio sessions and training by the sports technician

employed at the school<sup>63</sup>. As a result of this she went on to enter paralympic competitions and enjoyed success in them.

### ***Inclusion in the wider school environment***

#### ***Pupil encouragement***

As mentioned in the earlier field notes, at the end of year assembly the first awards to be given out were attendance awards, the second certificates were commendations for hard work and the third was the allocation of House awards. It was repeated that the children received house points simply by taking part and that *winning was not the most important thing*. Through the pupil shadowing it was obvious that in an average day each child usually received a great deal of encouragement and praise for any efforts put in. 'Trying' was clearly established as the most important aspect of work. If the child attempted to give an idea or a piece of information they were rewarded with very positive affirmations from the teacher. I commented in one lesson that "all were expected to work at their own pace and were encouraged at that pace" and also that the teacher "Especially encouraged those who struggled". Smaller groups were far better for this, provoking far greater interaction. In my lesson observation notes I had jotted: 'mistakes treated light-heartedly and still with lots of praise...Tres bien, bonn, round of applause etc...The children were praised for making an effort'. And the need for pupils to improve on what they had done was also handled extremely tactfully, for example in an English lesson the teacher responded to a child's work with 'It's good, but would you like to go to the next level and do it better?' My lesson observations concluded that, 'Teacher support was willingly given to any student that needed it, without criticism.'

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63. On the Activities Sheet this is referred to as Superstars.

In eleven of the twenty sessions that I observed I made specific comment on how the teachers used a great deal of encouragement and praise with the students ('good lad, well done, great stuff, excellent'). By the time the pupils reached Y13, it was obviously decided that the students did not need such 'energetic' enthusiasm; instead their correct answers were simply acknowledged by the teacher using the information that the student had given. All of the teachers appeared to accept that there would be a wide disparity in the work that they received from the children, and to accept the situation as such. In a Health and Social Care lesson I noted that 'Whereas some pupils had a side of A4 full of writing, others had a few words written (or stuck from magazines) onto a piece of paper. The teacher seemed to accept this as the 'norm', the children were working in their chosen form of presentation'.

The main form of competitiveness that I encountered was not the desire to succeed ahead of others, but the competition for time and attention from the teachers. In addition to Tom's comments on p.197 about how being on a school team would help you get to know and be praised by the teachers more, these comments were also made during in-depth interviews:

### **Robert, (Y9)**

Carla: Do you think it makes students think about their health and their fitness more at all?  
(*Being at a SSC*)

**Robert: I think that they try and impress the people more because they're like 'sir look at me, look at me'...and they don't even hardly take very much notice in ya...they just like say, like half the time, you're like trying to impress them and they're not even bothered, they just like, tell you what to do and you do it and that's it.**

### **Brian, (Y10)**

Carla: So what do you enjoy most? Doesn't have to be lessons it can be anything...

**Brian: Some of the lessons are alright, but I've noticed that with some teachers they don't really take notice and they only give the people who they like the opportunity of learning. They just leave the others to it.**

Carla: Right...okay...

**Brian: But most of the teachers, like want to help everyone as a whole.**



It is interesting, and contradictory to existing self-concept research, that those students who put most weight on teacher attention were all male.

In conclusion, this appeared to be an extremely inclusive school as exemplified, in particular, during school events. The inclusiveness did not appear to be a structured element of the students' PE lessons though, and as a result a number of students appeared to gain no benefits from these sessions, in terms of their health and fitness, their skills or their enjoyment.

The students' attitudes to 'achievement' suggested that they did not feel pressure to compete at levels that were above them. But the question that this raises is whether that meant that they did not feel encouraged to push themselves onto higher levels of achievement.

### ***Summary***

This chapter aimed to present sufficient data to give a clear view of Green Acre High School at a point in time. I attempted to present an overall picture of the school as well as focusing on the more specific areas of PE, sport and inclusion. In the following chapter I discuss the themes that emerged from that data and explore some of the inconsistencies between policy and practice.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **Data Analysis and Discussion**

#### ***Overview***

This chapter explores the themes and incongruencies that emerged when exploring the data. It explores the difficulties that were encountered in answering the original research questions, when no shared culture was found to exist at the school, and the impact that the school's specialism had made. It also investigates some of the more prevailing issues that did have an impact on the lives of the staff and students at Green Acre.

#### **5.1 Re-statement of the Research Problem**

This research sought to explore the effects of the rapidly emerging phenomenon of the Specialist School. At the time of the research's commencement, the expeditious development of the Specialist School was being questioned by educationalists, who feared that it would create a 'two-tier' system of education (Gorard and Taylor, 2001, Henry and Hutchins, 2001, Thornton, 2001); and by Government officials, who felt that rather drastic changes were being made on the basis of "wishful thinking" as opposed to "sound evidence" (HCESC, 2003, p.34). Little thorough research into whole-school effects had been undertaken. The foundation of my concern was the possibility that in promoting a policy whereby one particular subject area 'transforms' the ethos of the Specialist School, those pupils with no expertise in that area would, perhaps, feel side-lined. And that if the aim of a school was success in one particular field, then there may be a detrimental effect on the motivation of those seen to 'fail' in that area.

In the same vein as earlier, small-scale explorations, such as Houlihan's (1999), this research aimed to present "the members' perspectives on the social reality of the observed setting" (Altheide & Johnson, 1994, p.490), to give voice to the participants in the drama. I sought to discover whether the school inhabitants saw the aims of the school as being based on theories of inclusivity or exclusivity, and to observe the effect that this had on *them*. As I explored these questions, triangulating comments with observations and literature, I then drew out some 'fuzzy generalisations' (Bassey et al 2001) as to the possibility of comparisons being found in similar institutions.

## **5.2 School Culture- Reality or Myth?**

It is important to remember that Green Acre had been functioning as a SSC for two years prior to the onset of this study. And at this point evidence suggested that there was, in fact, no shared culture at the school. There was not the "set of core values" that Leader, (2004) sees as vital for a unifying culture. Hargreaves (1994) argues that it is a presumption to believe that all establishments have shared cultures, especially when the organisation is large and complex, as was the case with Green Acre. What was more in evidence was a subject specific sub-culture, as suggested by Ball (1987). This could be seen especially within the PE department, which was physically separated from the rest of the school, being situated in an adjacent building, but also socially; because of their subject area, their casual appearance, and their 'singled out' status.

What was not evident at Green Acre was the "distinct mission and ethos" (DfEE, 2001, p.5) that became central to the Government's manifesto for a specialist culture. Neither staff nor pupils recognised a shared identity that had

developed through the school's specialism. Without that shared vision, it became impossible to surmise the affect that group values were having on the students at Green Acre, as their views, I soon discovered, were even more diverse than those of the teaching staff.

When 22 teaching staff were asked<sup>64</sup> whether Green Acre had a distinctive ethos, 15 of them, the vast majority, said 'no'. Of those seven that believed that there was a distinctive ethos, some views were shared; four believed that the culture was based on caring. Just one member of staff (the Director of Sports) mentioned the sports element of the school culture. That no other staff mentioned sports, in relation to the culture of the school, is highly significant.

### ***The School Building***

Situated amidst a maze of suburban roundabouts this was a 'seventies concrete structure with limited aesthetic appeal. The building reflected the feelings of many of the staff, in that it was tired and in need of a pick me up. The few modern additions were far more appealing, but they were somewhat swamped by the existing structure. The Governors' comments that it was 'pleasant' but 'rather stark' were very apt. Ofsted (2002) were a little more blunt with their synopsis that "in too many classrooms and too many corridors, the environment is cold and unwelcoming" (p.20) but the comment was very valid. Teaching staff had extremely mixed feelings about how it felt to walk into the school. Whereas some perceived a pleasant atmosphere, others saw only vandalism and foul language. The problems such as graffiti, litter and vandalism, made this school an unpleasant place to walk into for a significant number of

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<sup>64</sup> Appendix F.

staff and could have been remedied. The littering and defacement suggested that some pupils did not respect their school and did not want to be there. Displays being damaged, was also mentioned by a number of staff as a persistent problem.

From the outset the diversity of views from staff, concerning the school building, indicated the huge spectrum of beliefs and opinions that the teaching staff at this school held. Some staff looked only for the positives, such as pleasant atmosphere, overlooking any physical hang-ups, whereas others used adjectives like untidy and dirty to reflect their general dissatisfaction with the school.

### ***The School Structure and Relationships***

Mr Bennett was a truly charismatic leader at Green Acre. His openness and warmth of character was constant; yet even he perceived the 'closed nature' of his school. It was through discussions with him that the new parameters put in place by unions to protect teacher's time, and the elimination of demands made through 'goodwill' on main grade teachers was made most clear. This echoed Grace's (1987) comment that the effect that legislature emerging from central government was having on teachers was a: "steady erosion of teachers' professional autonomy, and certainly of any remaining sense of partnership in education" (p.217). Mr Bennett explained how teachers were now so overburdened with administrative tasks, that if they were not to be held accountable for a commission, then, in the majority of cases, they would not bother themselves to do it - my interviews and questionnaires being clear examples of this. The time available to meet together as a whole staff, to contribute to ideas and look forward had decreased, resulting in a more

fractured culture. Staff wanted to be involved in making decisions, but they did not want to give up the extra time needed to do so.

Morale at the school was low, as commented on by a number of staff, and even by the school Governors through questionnaire. One of the causes of this was the lack of 'whole school' decisions that were made. The school was rigidly founded on a role culture with tiers of management. Due to the time restrictions adhered to by all main grade staff, as has already been mentioned, all decisions were made by middle, or predominantly upper-tier management. Only 39% of staff felt that their opinions were valued, and only 45% felt that the work that they put in at the school was valued.

That it was becoming a 'increasing difficulty' to find support was mentioned by one member of staff. The staff questionnaire suggested that there were cracks in the relationship between management and main grade staff. Two teachers commented that although they knew their efforts were valued they were rarely told so, and that, instead, it generally came across by their not being criticized. This would suggest a culture of criticism, as apposed to praise. Although it may be suggested that teaching professionals should be beyond needing encouragement, from experience it becomes draining, continually 'giving' of yourself to the students if you do not feel that your efforts are appreciated.

The rapid turnover of staff also impeded relationships forming. In two years, 18 teachers had left Green Acre and 22 joined. During my time of study a senior member of staff quite blatantly rang from the staff room telephone on two occasions in order to request job applications for other schools. The result of this was that 'group indentity-cliques' formed within department teams. Here the

staff offered the other members of their team the support that may have been lacking elsewhere. This could be seen, for example, when the Head of PE Faculty shared his disastrous lesson with the rest of his team and ‘they gave him literal and metaphorical slaps on the back.’ Amiable working relationships did form between these cliques, but as the majority of time was spent within department teams, this is where the strongest friendships tended to form.

Some staff felt undervalued in general, and by the Senior Management Team in particular. The statement: “No time. No encouragement! Exhaustion”, given in answer to the question of why a member of staff was not involved in extra-curricular activities, represented the sentiments of a number of the staff. Whether the cause was the fabric of the school building, pupil behaviour, timetables or management, many staff were unhappy. Staff were extremely stressed, and one must question whether this is now simply an element of the ‘organisational schizophrenia’ that Handy and Aitken, (1986) describe, where the aims and purpose of the educational system are unclear. Are schools a “bureaucratic factory delivering goods or is it a collective of individual professionals each doing their own professional thing?”(p.94). And can the high stress levels possibly be eradicated? Are the pressures on teachers to perform along rigid business guidelines, after many have entered teaching with more creative and altruistic intentions always going to create conflict, and the resulting pressures?

At Green Acre there were continual comments about workloads and lack of time. This appeared to have been exacerbated by the introduction of the school specialism, as I shall discuss shortly, but came to a particularly ugly head during the Ofsted week, when staffs’ capabilities were tested. Here stress erupted into

anger and upset as some teachers' monumental efforts were negated by one negative comment. This week also caused greater friction between an already tense staff, as colleagues were put into competition to see who would give the best performance. Bitterness bubbled between those who would jump through all of the hoops in order to get a top grade rating, and those who wanted to defiantly show the inspectors 'normality'. A personal battle erupted in some, between wanting to remain honest and wanting to do well (and 'perform') for the greater good of the school. There were emotions of utter shame and anger when a poor grade was attained, and not very well disguised relief for those who gained a glowing report. Nerves were stretched to breaking point.

During this week some staff's confidences were destroyed and other professionals resorted to immature jibes such as "...the inspector can shove it up his bum!" in their inert anger. There is the impending humiliation that failing schools and teachers may, as Booth (2000) commented, be named and shamed. Has the "steady erosion of teacher's professional autonomy" that Grace (1987, p. 217) refers to, also resulted in a steady erosion of the personalities and relationships on which school cultures were built?

Although at all times the staff maintained an amiable working relationship with one another, there was a vast diversity of views within the school. This was evident in responses to simple questions presented to staff, where answers ranged from black to white. Whereas one teacher perceived a 'pleasant atmosphere between staff and pupils'; another perceived an, 'us versus them' mentality. Where one teacher noted 'friendly welcoming staff', another saw 'foul language and a frantic atmosphere'. Hargreaves (1993a) argues that there is a tradition of individualism within the teacher culture that works as a heresy



against collegiality. Looked at this way, is it possible for any school to develop a truly shared culture?

Added to the blurred nature of staff roles is the intense scrutiny that teachers today are expected to experience, in terms of observations and the production of monitoring paperwork. As a result many staff are unable to 'look forward' as a whole school as they are far too pre-occupied 'watching their own backs'. Mr Bennett provided something of an antidote to this with his 'I'm not perfect...so sue me' attitude, but then this laid back approach was not appropriate for some staff, who were eager to get certain matters sorted.

If we parallel this confusion with the children's desire for strong relationships with their teachers, as came clearly through the data, we can see problems arising. The 1997 quote from Ofsted that Green Acre was a "caring school" was used regularly in school literature, almost like a mantra, to remind staff that the school was caring, even though they may feel that sometimes they were too busy to show it. In their in-depth interviews nine pupils focused on their relationship with teachers as the most decisive element with regards to their enjoyment and memories of school<sup>65</sup>, but one teacher commented that, "with the new arrangements we don't really know any of our year nines". This is reminiscent of Helsby's (1999) investigation of teaching, where one teacher said, "In English, we used to talk about anything and everything", but she had felt that there was no longer space for such conversations, "because of all the things you have to do and tick off" (p.79).

The teachers at Green Acre would often bemoan their lack of time to fulfil

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<sup>65</sup> The importance of students' relationships with parents appears to be enduring. In James' (2004) study of FE colleges, the amount of attention and the friendship that students received from their tutors still had a significant impact on their attitude towards learning.

their duties, with comments such as, 'there's no time for anything in this place' (100702). After one staffroom discussion I recorded the sentiment that, 'they all felt that their day was so filled with shuffling paper that they had hardly any time to teach'. Helsby (1999) commented that with the sheer volume of knowledge that teachers must instil into our youth today, there is little room for general interaction and the development of life skills.

Practicality would suggest that the teachers only really built strong relationships with certain students. Some pupils felt very supported by their teachers, but others felt neglected, or 'stabbed in the back'. This is only natural, teachers are human and will build far better relationships with some students than with others for a whole variety of reasons. Though this may not result in unequal treatment, their feelings toward that pupil will be evident. It was sometimes the most unlikely students that yearned for more attention from the teachers, and who were least likely to get it. Robert, Year 9, for example, was desperate for the staff just to spend that extra bit of time and *listen* to him. He said, "Um, the teachers, they don't give you a chance to talk if like you get in trouble and they just like blame it on you and that's it, they don't hear your side..."

The Head's comment that due to the problems and lack of funding at the school it was difficult to retain staff, was very visible. The rapidity of teacher turnover inevitably had an effect on relationships, and the pupils were decidedly unimpressed by it. Some staff felt that their involvement in extra-curricular activities was a way of getting to know the pupils better, but others, as already mentioned, were simply too exhausted to put in the additional effort. The leaving

teacher's comment that there were 'so many new faces *these days*' suggested that perhaps the staffing situation had been more stable previously.

As the personal and social aspect of teaching is becoming crowded out it is increasingly becoming the parent's responsibility to ensure that those skills are developing. Diminishing parental support for the school was another issue noted by Ofsted as an area in need of improvement. The PTA, which was described as 'active' in 1997, no longer existed in 2002. And commenting on the small numbers of parents who signed their children's weekly planners, Ofsted came to the conclusion that "The impact of parents and carers' involvement on the work of the school is unsatisfactory overall" (p.26). But was this the parents' fault? Comments from parents about the school in general were positive, but when it came to the school working closely with parents, or the school encouraging parents to become more involved with life at school, there was a slightly more negative response. Some teachers commented that parents were made to feel welcome by friendly office staff, but were they ever allowed through by these smiling gatekeepers?

Parents appeared to be kept at arm's length, visits were formal. When I suggested asking parents to come in to do some sports coaching, the comment was blatantly ignored by the PE staff. Obviously this was not a universal opinion at the school, as other teachers suggested inviting parents in to school as one method of improving behaviour, but there remains a need to modify some of the guarded attitudes of teachers, if parents are truly to be treated as partners in their children's education.

So were the parents simply not bothering, or did they actually feel shut out? Did they not feel welcome, or did they not wish to be involved? The results

from the 2002 Ofsted questionnaires suggested that the parents did not feel *encouraged* to play an active role within the school. This raises the question of how much parents feel that they should, or would like to be involved in their children's schooling, and how encouraging the school is of such involvement.

Pupil relationships, contrary to any presumptions that may exist due to the poor behaviour, were actually very constant. Apart from one visible incident of bullying outside of the classroom the students were, as I mentioned in my fieldnotes, 'patient and encouraging' to one another on the whole, at least within the classroom. Whether bullying can ever be totally eradicated is debatable. Even as adults we recognise that it is a problem that persists.

### ***Pupil Behaviour***

There were vastly different views on many elements of the school culture, just one of which was pupil behaviour. Comments from Ofsted (2002) suggested that behaviour had declined, and in conversation with some staff it was revealed that they had come close to leaving because of their exhaustion in attempting to deal with it; but to some staff there was no issue. The fact that the staff made 25 different suggestions relating to how behaviour difficulties could be tackled at the school, suggests that behaviour most certainly was problematic, but also that staff were extremely divided in their views on it. The suggestions, ranging from 'liking' the children more to isolating offenders, from greater sanctions to greater inclusion painted a picture of a staff with wide-ranging ideas.

In 1997, Ofsted commented that the behaviour at Green Acre was "good and often very good" but by 2002 this had changed to "poor behaviour is not uncommon". Within that same period there was almost a three-fold rise in temporary and permanent exclusions. In one month's briefings 16 suspensions

were mentioned related to attacks and bullying. In these same briefings issues related to poor pupil behaviour received twice the number of mentions gained by sports related topics. I observed numerous occasions of rudeness towards teachers (and even visitors) and refusal to comply with the teacher's wishes.

One would naturally begin to question whether this fall in standards of behaviour reflects national behaviour trends, and this would be an interesting area to explore, but comments from some teaching staff suggested that this was *not* the norm. Two of the PE teaching staff commented that other schools had 'none of the behavioural problems that you encounter at Green Acre' and a trainee teacher commented how much she was looking forward to her new school, because standards and expectations at Green Acre were 'just so low'. But from where did these problems stem?

One factor appeared to be gratuitous 'form filling'. Rebuking a child in any formal way meant more paperwork, when the staff were already snowed under by it. Is it any surprise that many teachers were tempted to 'turn a blind eye' instead? Another influential issue may have been the staff instability at the school, which has had a consistently high teacher turnover rate, as has already been mentioned. The regularity of changes in teaching staff was noted by a number of children. Though Will's (Year 13) comment about 'PE teachers coming and leaving...we have about one a week...' was obviously exaggerated, he undoubtedly felt that there was constant change. This was echoed in Mark's comment (Year 11); he said that the aspect he would remember most about the school was the amount of teacher changes that he had been through. In just two years both his form tutor and his drama teacher had changed; and he had been taught by *four* different music teachers. There was even instability within the

lunchtime staff. A conversation with one lunchtime supervisor revealed that they were short-staffed during my period of intense visits. Only two were left and one of those remaining said that she was thinking of leaving because they felt overworked. One teacher suggested greater staff stability as one method of tackling behaviour problems. What was clear was that approaches to tackling behaviour needed to be put firmly in place because a number of staff felt unsupported. The numerous suggestions from staff clearly showed that there was no sense of direction in how the problem should be approached, but comments proved that more form filling was not the answer.

### ***Traditions and Beliefs***

Because of the social problems that Green Acre faced on a daily basis, the buoyant nature of Mr Bennett was invaluable. The attitude of the head teacher was that Green Acre as a school was far from perfect, but it was making progress. To Mr Bennett problems were to be found and tackled, not covered up. When Mr Bennett spoke to the sixth form about the forthcoming Ofsted inspection, he addressed them in much the same way as he had done the staff, reading out the same excerpts from paperwork that had been sent away. He also said to the pupils: 'I do believe that we've got work to do, but we've done and are doing a lot.' This fit well with a school that, on the whole, seemed to accept that excellence was, at present at least, beyond its reach.

Mr Bennett liked to stress that the school was a caring one, despite the fact that when the staff was asked whether the school had a particular ethos<sup>66</sup> or 'feel' to it, most were unsure. When I discussed the 'feel of the school' with staff most believed that there was no shared culture at the school. One teacher

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<sup>66</sup> The term ethos was used at this time, though I later came to believe that the term 'culture' was far more appropriate, as has already been stated.

pointed out that, “different staff would have different perceptions” as the questionnaire results suggested. The same teacher added that the school did used to have a very caring ethos but not so much any more. It seems that part of this may have been sacrificed to stress, as the Governors’ responses cited earlier support.

Mr Bennett made a point of reminding the staff to praise the children for things that they had achieved or simply for good attendance. This was a school where the children demanded your time and care, and this sometimes needed to be given at the expense of completing paperwork. Yes, at the time of the study policies weren’t up to date and the PE Policy was defunct<sup>67</sup>, but time was spent dealing with many problems that other, similar schools may not experience, or not to such a great extent. Instead, this was the type of school where the original head teacher still showed his fondness for the school by returning to prize giving evenings.

The other more unfortunate result of this flexible attitude, necessary for dealing with children who have many social and emotional problems, was a lack of rigidity in terms of expected standards of behaviour. It was good that the year nine pupils that I interviewed did not perceive too much pressure to succeed, but a shame that the other two thirds of them did not bother to turn up to the interview. Comments such as, “It’ll just get vandalised” in response to a teacher’s announcement that they were to get a new astro-turf, reflected the general negativity from some students, which increasingly de-motivated teachers found hard to tackle. The comments from a small number of students, criticising the ‘rowdiness’ in school, suggested that they yearned for a more

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<sup>67</sup> When the Director of Sport saw me reading the PE Faculty Handbook she was not happy. She said that it was completely out of date and did not want me to read it.

stable, controlled environment and that they were frustrated that they could not get on and learn. How could order be restored for these pupils without discipline becoming yet another paper-exercise for teachers?

When staff were asked<sup>68</sup> whether they felt that values such as hard work and respect for others were given enough precedence at Green Acre, there were extremely mixed results. Eight staff (24%) answered with a straightforward 'yes', 12 (36%) a straightforward 'no' and other results varied. Two staff thought that teachers would promote the values of the Code of Conduct as a 'matter of course'. Two were unsure of the extent to which whole school values permeated into the classroom, and five staff commented on the culture and background of the pupils, which did not allow for them to take pride in their achievements. It was not 'cool' to work hard and do well. One teacher thought that there was room for further improvement and another that only staff appeared to adhere to the respect and hard work maxim.

Green Acre school was not a school where all of the 'i's were dotted and the t's were crossed'. There was an awful lot of simply 'getting by'. But this does not negate the huge amount of hard work that was being put in there, or the efforts of the management. The school was dealing with some extremely difficult children, and, more often than not, doing it with a smile and a caring word. But continually coping with behaviour problems causes the remaining hours in the day, meant for administrative organisation, to dwindle considerably. It would seem that social problems had a far more marked influence on the school's fractured culture than its specialist status. But what effect was the school's new status really having on the fabric and culture of the school?

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<sup>68</sup> In Questionnaire G.



### 5.3 The Impact of the Specialism

The Specialist Schools programme helps schools, in partnership with private sector sponsors, and supported by additional Government funding, to build on their particular strengths and establish distinctive identities through their chosen specialisms. (DfEE, 1997, p.5)

It may have been a little naïve, but I do not believe that it was unfair of me to assume, in response to the Government's propaganda, that the specialism of the school would somehow be palpable. The reality was more in tune with the fears of the HSESC (2003), that although the Government places great emphasis on Specialist Schools creating a distinctive ethos or character that reflects their specialism, in reality they are trapped within the heavy circumscription of the National Curriculum. HSESC suggest that the type of 'diversity' that the Government seeks is a superficial one, no more than a variety of schools in name alone (p.26). Contrary to Government claims, there was no discernible 'sporting ethos' at this school that set it apart. But, true to the HSESC's fears of superficiality, the status was used extensively in the school's marketing.

#### ***Marketing***

The specialism was repeatedly pushed as the school's primary 'selling point'. That the boys' success in sport earned two pages more in the school prospectus than the half page general introduction to the school, signifies the value that was placed upon sporting success. The dominance of pictures of sporting activities would entice those interested in sporting competition to apply for a place at the school. Whether Open Evenings or Prize Givings, the Head Teacher's speeches would always be littered with allusions to the school's sporting status, and never to general health, fitness or inclusion. The fact that success in a sports championship pushed the specialism from sub, to main

heading status is significant. It seems that competitive success enabled them to feel more proud of their specialist status, even though 'competition' was placed *last* in a list of six priorities ordered by the staff.

When not on the topic of sport, Mr Bennett portrayed a truly inclusive school where each child was encouraged to reach their potential and where all children were treated equally<sup>69</sup>. Unfortunately these sentiments appeared to waver when faced with sporting success. That two and a half pages of 2003-2004 School Prospectus was dedicated to the school's sporting success, suggests that, actually, winning does just rate a little more highly. This confusion mirrors exactly the contradictory aims that SSCs are faced with.

In the same prospectus there are more references to sports-related extra-curricular activities than to all of the other activities (including art, drama and music) put together. That 'sport' was not even mentioned by pupils when they discussed the highlights of the year at Prize Giving was significant. Instead they mentioned more inclusive activities such as school trips. So what effect was the specialism really having on the fabric and the culture of the school?

### ***Physical Environment and Facilities***

I am not certain what my expectations of a SSC were, but I expected the sports aspect to somehow be *visible*, and more than a sub-heading on a sign. When a Year Nine boy was asked whether the specialism had influenced the whole school, his answer was, "I don't think so, I think it's just a title". It was very difficult, simply by walking around the school, to find any further evidence of the permeation of the specialism. One hurdle to the status having an effect throughout the school, was the PE department's physical separation from the

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<sup>69</sup> Open Evening 2002.

rest of the school. The year 9's view that the sports college was 'separate' was hardly surprising, considering the PE staff had their own separate staff room and the faculty even arranged its own, separate prize giving.

Contrary to my expectations of a specialist sports establishment, during the time of the study the sports facilities at the school struggled to cater adequately for all of the students. Facilities comprised of one large hall, the size of a basketball court, and a smaller gym. The large hall was stark, but adequate, but the small gym was in rather a sorry state of repair with an uneven floor and crooked basketball hoops. Also on one side of the small gym there was an open storage area that often overflowed its contents into the main floor. The dance studio, with its mirrored wall, was ideal for movement sessions, and occasionally used for games in wet weather. The inadequacy of outdoor facilities has already been discussed, with teachers bargaining over the tennis courts when the fields were flooded. Lack of facilities in poor weather was definitely a cause for concern, but one that has hopefully been rectified since with the introduction of the new astro-turf.

It is partly because of the poor outdoor facilities that such a large proportion of the student's lessons failed to provide continuity and progression. Like any school, there were badminton lessons where students were playing with rackets with broken strings. Elements such as the dual-use fitness gym and ICT suite, which had been bought with money from the specialism, were impressive, but only used by the students for a very small fraction of their PE time. These modifications came to represent the school's specialism to some students and teachers.

### ***The Wider School Environment***

When I shadowed pupils over five days, one from each year group, it just so happened that I did not see one child doing PE. This was not intentional, but worked out very well as I had planned separate observations for the PE department (as already discussed). Because of this arrangement I was able to visit twenty different classrooms and search for evidence of the school's status. Rather than the posters encouraging the children to get involved in different activities, motivational posters and statements, what I actually saw was the same orange coloured, A5 piece of paper that was a list of clubs and activities, pinned up somewhere in nine of the classrooms, and very little else. Three science labs had displays that referred to nutrition, (a curriculum topic), one French classroom had a rugby poster and one English classroom had a picture of a footballer reading a book. Both were male. There had been little to no visible seepage of physical activity, sport or health and fitness into the wider curriculum.

I spent twenty sessions visiting other faculties, waiting for any references to the school's status within the general banter that encompassed a 'typical', non-PE lesson. Mr Grey, a maths teacher, who had previously been quite supportive of my research, deliberately used sporting examples in his session (having been pre-warned of my visit), even though he admitted that their inaccuracies caused further complications in what he was attempting to explain. I was well aware that they were for my benefit, although I do not doubt that Mr Grey, a supporter of the school's development, would use them on other occasions where they would be more appropriate.

In a Health and Social Care session that I observed, they just happened to be looking at the benefits of exercise, a curriculum topic. Within this they discussed such ideas as going to sporting clubs and meeting 'other people'. This was discussed in a detached way and did nothing to encourage the group to take up on more that was on offer at the school. The only spontaneous, fitness related conversation that I witnessed, was when a non-PE teacher asked a group of girls whether they were going to watch a ladies football match.

Although excusable on a limited budget, the use of McDonalds vouchers to reward hard work hardly befits a school promoting a healthy and active lifestyle. The fact that the general health and fitness of the pupils at Green Acre was not mentioned once in seven Sports College Management meetings goes some way to explaining why the school's status had no visible impact on the wider school.

### ***The PE Faculty***

It is no surprise that when I performed structured observations of PE lessons, the physical evidence of the school's status was more obvious. The corridor outside the changing rooms was papered with displays advertising different in-school activities as well as external clubs, and inside the changing rooms a poster advertised 'earlybird' activity sessions. But this visibility of physical activity did not seem to have extended beyond the separate sports block.

The disorganisation of the PE department did not support the image of a faculty that was cutting edge. But, as has been discussed, this was a department in a period of some change. The Director of Sport had been overstretched whilst also playing the role of head of department and there were

inevitable teething problems when the new Head of Department replaced her. But the rather ad hoc approach towards many activities did not inspire confidence in this department's ability to foster school-wide advancements.

That the PE staff were last to have their new timetables and that meetings that were supposed to happen didn't, leaving the staff 'a little lost', resulted in an air of confusion that was not uncommon within the department. The staff were not even aware what time their extra-curricular activities started on paper and were late to start Early Bird activities. This alone would be sufficient to explain the decline in numbers of students attending extra-curricular activities between Year 9 and Year 10.

Time management was a huge problem and put something of a shadow over what were actually a fun, motivated and talented group of teachers. For a centre of PE excellence, the lesson observations showed that provision was, at times, poor. Some facilities were inadequate, with pupils often missing their curricular entitlement due to poor weather flooding pitches. Factors as simple as this could have caused the increase in negativity in Year 9s towards physical activity. As rather chaotic occasions were not isolated events<sup>70</sup>, I could not help but question what was 'special' about this department that had obtained such significant funding?

In concluding this section I cannot ignore the statement from the member of PE staff, who had fears for her post if the specialist funding ran out. She could not see why they would regain specialist status, because 'there was

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<sup>70</sup> Another example of this was inter-house sports, which involved those pupils who had 'shouted loud enough' playing whilst the rest of the pupils simply loitered. When I questioned Ms White about this she stressed that house games were not the department's responsibility. Yet within the 2003-2004 school prospectus, within the Physical Education section, it states: "Inter-house sports competitions are organised throughout the year culminating with our annual sports day" (p.25).

nothing special enough going on at the school which justified it' (191102). How was this department raising standards, and spreading excellence, the aims of the SSC mission statement? On the contrary, despite the entirely positive manner of the teachers with the students, a great deal of the organisation raised cause for concern, as it must have impeded progress. It is all but impossible not to raise the question why, exactly, this subject was chosen as the school 'specialism'.

### ***Attitudes and Opinions toward the Specialism***

#### ***Staff***

Prosser (1999) comments that "Meaningful changes to a generic school culture are rare and difficult to achieve..." (p.8). There was no palpable feature at Green Acre indicative of the school's culture. As has already been mentioned, the status of the school was not generally mentioned unless raised as a topic by myself. At Green Acre most teaching staff believed that there had been no change to the school culture, with one commenting that 'he didn't feel that Specialist Sports Status had really had any affect on the school at all'. It is significant that those who stated that there had been a change in culture gave four very differing views of that change. Only the Director of Sport mentioned the 'raised status of sport', one teacher suggested that there was more focus and another that there was more emphasis on achievement. The fourth response equated the changed status of the school with a decline in manners and social skills, or, the equation of sporting culture with the production of a 'yob' mentality.

Ball (1987) suggests that, "Innovations are rarely neutral. They tend to advance or enhance the position of certain groups and disadvantage or damage the position of others" (p.32). There were those teachers at Green Acre that

actively supported the changed status of the school, those that quietly opposed it, and those who were, by and large, indifferent. That the Director of Sport, and the PE department in general, had supported the change is taken as a given, especially as some teachers' and support staff's roles had been developed through the change in status. They had additional funding, opportunities for responsibility and training, and a raised status. The Senior Management tier had made the decisions concerning the change in status and so their support, also, could be presumed. It was the opinions of the large number who had had no involvement in the bid for specialist status that I was most interested in.

Whereas 90% of Senior Management and PE staff claimed that they had benefited from the specialist status, only **9%** of all 'other' teaching staff felt that they had. Interestingly, of the 4 Senior Management (non-PE) that replied: one said that they had benefited from the school's changed status, but did not state a reason why; one named non-contact time, training availability and better facilities as the reasons why things had improved for them; one named an ICT system, bought through SSCS funding; and one mused whether things *had* improved for them, and then went on to name the same ICT system and more staff as benefits.

That some of the 'other' staff at Green Acre felt that they had been disadvantaged by the changes was clear. Comments made by staff in other subject areas, such as: 'Most money and staffing allowances go to the PE Faculty' and 'The specialist status is for sport other areas of the school feel second best' showed that some staff felt disadvantaged by the specialism, and mirrored the sense of malcontent that Houlihan (1999) found exactly. In 1999, Houlihan's investigation of SSCs also found "a sense of grievance from other



departments at the flow of additional resources to physical education” (p.13). When he discussed ‘dissident’ staff in his research, he mentioned how much upset and ill-feeling could have been prevented if all staff had felt more involved from stage one. This may have been the case at Green Acre. Hargreaves (1994) commented that collaboration is reduced to cooptation for many teachers, or “a commitment not to developing and realizing purposes of one’s own but to implementing purposes devised by others” (p.191). It would appear that the ‘sporting’ non-PE teacher who felt that he would be able to contribute more, but was not given the opportunity, would have liked to have been more involved in specialist innovations. Ball (1987) discussed the fact that the acceptance of ‘change’ decisions had been found to be directly related to the amount that individuals within the group had participated in that decision. It would seem that the adoption of a sports specialism at this school alienated the PE department further, rather than making a ‘sporting mentality’ a part of the culture of the school as a whole. It may be that if the rest of the school had been more involved in the initial decision to take on a specialist status, and the application for that status, then they would have felt more accepting and supportive of that change.

With some teachers feeling undervalued and under extreme pressure, the inputting of a large amount of funding into just one subject area, resulting in increased staffing, improved facilities and additional ‘time out’ for training, did little for the motivation of the other staff. The feeling of the humanities teacher; that whilst all of the money was being ‘poured’ into PE the rest of the school was ‘missing out’, was not an isolated instance.

## ***Pupils***

Only three out of 23 students interviewed believed that SSC Status had made any difference to the whole school, and only four said that they would refer to the status if telling others about the school. The majority of the students, despite some effort, simply could not find what it was that was 'special' about their school. Just like Gareth, Y11, who, when asked whether he thought that he was lucky coming to a SSC, answered, 'Ummm...probably not really, because I don't see anything different really'.

There was a profundity of extra-curricular activities seen on paper at Green Acre, but in reality a number of these sessions had been stopped due to low attendance, or had simply been 'pencilled in' in case needed. Some children appeared disenchanted by the 'fallacy' of the activities available at their school, and others were perfectly content with what was on offer. Where some students believed that their school took sport 'more seriously' than others, and that their school 'stood out' because of its specialist status, others thought that 'its just the same as other schools' and that 'you haven't got extra lessons for sport or anything like that'.

In the Year 9 and 10's Sports Questionnaire the question about the pupils' form tutor enjoying physical activity was asked in order to glean an impression of the student's perception of the 'sporting' or 'non-sporting' culture of Green Acre. Was a significant adult, whom they saw every day, a facilitator of the new culture that the school was developing? When one bears in mind the fact that students are *supposed* to retain the same form tutor throughout their time at the school, it is very interesting to see that there is a rise in 10% of boys perceiving that their form tutors do *not* like physical activity 'at all' and a rise in

21% of the girls. Their own opinion towards physical activity took an even greater down turn. The girls were over three times *more* likely to say that they *don't* enjoy physical activity at school at all (a jump from 7-24%) after a year at a SSC. And they are over four times *less* likely to say that they enjoy it 'A lot'.

Did these results reflect, as Flintoff and Scraton (2001) found in their research, that girls simply, "struggled to see a purpose" (p.13) for their PE lessons? Houlihan and Wong's (2005) study of SSCs in 2004, found that girls' take up of PE GCSE remains only 56% of that of boys (p.6). Flintoff and Scraton (2001) comment that girls' objections to PE appear to have remained remarkably stable over the years, "PE uniforms...no jewellery rules; compulsory showers..." (p.5). Even though, they add, there appears to be a greater number of women taking part in out of school physical activity than ever before (p.5). This was reflected in the large number of girls at Green Acre that took part in physically active clubs outside school. The other thing that remains stable, as the glorification of the boys' sporting success at the school proved, is the "higher status of so-called 'boys' activities'" (Flintoff, 2008, p.395).

There is also a slight decline in the number of pupils attending extra-curricular activities after a year and a decline in the number of pupils who felt that the school taught them that physical activities were good for them 'quite a lot' or 'a lot'. This may be the result of disenchantment with a glorified image of a SSC, or it may be increased cynicism as a natural result of the move and maturation from Year 9 to Year 10, but then, as has already been stated this was not clearly reflected in their views of school overall. Although 31% of the boys and girls (combined) had changed their view of their form tutor's enjoyment of physical activity from a positive to a negative, only 11% (combined) had

changed their perception of how much they enjoyed school from a positive to a negative. There is a considerable difference. And whereas all statements about their tutors were either the same, or more negative a year on, there was actually a combined increase of 18% in the boys and girls who said that they enjoyed or really enjoyed school after a year's attendance at Green Acre. So it is difficult to conclude that the increased cynicism toward physical activity is the result of an increased cynicism overall. It would appear that rather than doing the job of 'promoting sporting prowess' (DfEE, 1997, p.3) as the Government suggests a sporting specialism will, it is possible that there is a decline in some students desire to take part in physical activity within school after being at this SSC for one year.

When asked, during in-depth interviews, whether being at a SSC made them think more about their health and fitness, the pupils' responses were extremely mixed; while one student answered 'we do more in PE lessons' another answered 'No...you've been to the cafeteria!' Again the fractured nature of views at the school is in evidence.

The vast majority of students and staff who had been at the school both before and after the change in status, recognised no real difference in the school. Sarason (1971) is dubious whether new ideas, however enthusiastically presented, can really change the core values of a school.

Good ideas and missionary zeal are sometimes enough to change the thinking and actions of individuals; they are rarely, if ever, effective in changing complicated organisations (like the school) with traditions, dynamics, and goals of their own.  
(p.213)

And such appeared to be the case at Green Acre. Michael in Year 11 thought that the school took sports 'more seriously' but the only other references made were to new facilities and staff. Sharon, Year 11, made the comment that

'It's just got normal physical education and everything that other school's do, it's just that we get recognised where they wouldn't'. Staff, as has already been mentioned, also focused on the new PE roles and facilities when looking for change. That only one teacher referred to 'sport' or physical activity when asked how the specialist status had affected the school, and that was the Director of Sport, is worth re-iterating.

### ***Examination Results***

Evidence from the DfEE (2001), the DfES (2001) and Jesson (2002) suggested that the examination results of a school on achieving Specialist School status would be markedly improved<sup>71</sup>. In 2000 the DfEE said "Sports Colleges will raise standards of achievement in physical education and sports for all their students across the ability range" (p.2). Yet achievement at Green Acre had not shown a discernible improvement since its change in status.

Yeomans, Higham and Sharp (2000) found that the rapid improvement in Specialist Schools overall "masked considerable variations between the schools" (p.2) and that in one third of the schools that they looked at the percentage of pupils achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A\*-C had actually declined" (p.2). The fact that Green Acre continued to recruit pupils with very poor levels of achievement obviously had a continued effect on results. Gorard and Taylor (2001) stressed that, "The importance of student background factors in assessing relative performance is paramount" (p.367), but results at Green Acre still remained well below average when compared with similar schools in terms of free school dinners. The head teacher commented on the

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<sup>71</sup> It is also thought that the school would become a 'more popular option' (West *et al* 2000) but the numbers on roll had actually dropped at Green Acre since 1997.

misconceptions of the supposed affluence of his school's catchment area, when in reality it suffered from many of the problems that inner city areas would face.

By far the most efficient way to look at school examination results is to use the comprehensive monitoring by Ofsted (2002). It has already been established that the children at Green Acre are of well below average ability when they came into the school, and so standards of achievement remained low. But what sort of an impact on standards was PE, the school's specialist subject having? One would assume that a specialist subject is chosen because it is an area of particular quality, exemplary in its handling of the subject. Yet in the 1997 Ofsted Report that the teaching of PE was rated "satisfactory or good" overall "with a few shortcomings" (p.35), similar to all of the other subjects. In 2002 the overall quality of provision in physical education was seen as 'satisfactory'.

By 2002 physical education does get praise from Ofsted for certain strengths, such as 'effective teaching which motivates and inspires pupils' (p.14), but it is very difficult to find points that would lead you to believe that PE is something 'special' within the school. On the contrary, it is Design and Technology, History and ICT that are repeatedly picked out as examples of 'what the school does well' (p.7). In some instances PE is seen as being as *good* as other subjects, for example it is one of 5 subjects seen as having examples of very good and excellent teaching, but it is never seen as superior to other subjects in terms of its teaching and learning. Twice physical education is singled out; once in order to praise its curriculum, and the second time it is mentioned in the middle of discussing poor GCSE results across all subjects.

Somewhat randomly, in the middle of this discussion, it stated that, “the school met its SSC community targets” (p.8).

In both 2001 and 2002 the school did not meet the ‘realistic’ targets set in GCSE examinations. In 2002 the PE GCSE results were below average, though it was added that they were continuing to improve, and were above average for the rest of the school. Ofsted attributed much of this underachievement to a significantly high level of absenteeism from the pupils (5.1% unauthorised absences in the school year 2001-2002 compared to a national average of 1.1%). But there is also the decline in behaviour. There were nearly three times as many fixed and permanent exclusions in 2002 as there were in 1997<sup>72</sup>. Could these things be down to the narrow range of courses and, particularly, the lack of vocational courses that Ofsted noted in 2002, or are there other factors?

A subject specialism is supposed to raise standards overall at the school, yet we are told by Ofsted that, “The gap between the school’s performance and the rate of improvement nationally is widening” (2002, p.15). The additional funding which has been given to sport does not appear to be having a significant impact, on the contrary, Ofsted (2002) states that, “Teaching and learning are consistently good in design and technology, history and ICT and it is in these subjects that pupils are making the fastest progress” (p.19). So just where has this specialism been having an impact?

### ***Effects beyond the school gates***

Though the focus of this study has been the voices of those who were living the experience of specialist status, I would like to take just a brief look at the wider effects of the specialism. The Government vehemently sounded the

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<sup>72</sup> Of course it would prove foolish to base a decline in behaviour only upon these statistics, as they may only prove that the school was being more vigilant in its dealings with offenders.

need for specialist colleges to collaborate with partner schools, but Penney (2004) highlights the mis-match in this suggestion:

Headlines of press releases and newspaper articles have captured the irony that the very schools singled out to lead the spread of innovative practice and support the raising of standards across local networks are under overt pressure to 'out-perform' the schools that they are meant to be working with.

(Penney, 2004, p.4)

Hargreaves (2003) added that if schools were under pressure to keep their 'competitive edge', then why would they give their most prized secrets of success away? Levacic and Jenkins, (2004) found that, "There is no evidence as yet of Specialist Schools' adding value to pupils in non-Specialist Schools" (p.30). As would be expected, most partnerships that Green Acre established were not, in fact, with fellow secondary schools, but with their feeder schools. The Director of Sport often mentioned work that was going on in the local middle schools, and because of this I was surprised at the unenthusiastic feedback that I gained from these schools.

The data suggested that of six feeder schools, though four had been offered training in PE, only one school felt that the specialism had actually impacted on them. This school appeared to have an established relationship by which they received information and resources, but the other five did not. It seemed somewhat ironic that Ofsted took no interest in the sports specialism's impact on Green Acre, that its effect on PE was seen as so 'tiny' that it only warranted a ten-minute conversation, when, conversely, the Director of Sport had a far longer conversation with the inspector who was interested in the community side of things. Just whom the specialism prioritises in receiving benefits remains somewhat blurred.



## **5.4 Inclusion or Excellence?**

The above findings made it somewhat difficult to then answer my original question. Without a unified culture I was not able to assess the effect that that culture had on the pupils. Instead I needed to look more generally at how the school approached inclusion or excellence, a topic that was really only considered at the school on the advent of my research, as I have stated many times.

### ***PE and School Sport***

Physical activity does not appeal to all students. The heavy reliance on sufficient venues and equipment, and frequent poor weather conditions, all lead to an unpleasant 'hanging about' which just does not happen in other subjects, just as having to reveal your undressed body does not happen in other subjects. Some pupils thrive on the different atmosphere that sport encompasses and some detest it. Just as some students loved to get covered in mud and others dared not move an inch for fear of falling. Other subject areas are unlikely to leave you with a mild case of hypothermia. Some have the physical capability to excel in PE and others don't. PE does not have the security of order and predictability that many youngsters rely on in order to cope with the daily rigour of school. This causes barriers to PE's capability to include all students.

The students appeared to be extremely supportive of one another within lessons. As incidents such as the 'cigarettes' comment on sports day show, the students were eager to see their peers achieve, and it was not only reserved for their friends. In the dance lesson that the one female student found so difficult, her classmates were patient and encouraging. Of the dozens of PE lessons that

I observed, only once did I see a boy getting frustrated and abusive towards his team-mates, as he did not believe that they were playing well enough.

At this school, teachers were extremely patient and supportive and peer criticism was rare. Despite this, there was the issue prevalent in sporting activities of some children repeatedly being 'left out' of team play; and there was also the issue of the visibility of competency. In PE, the child's success or failure is put on display. Unbalanced teams and the dominance of stronger players, both of which were evident within Green Acre's PE lessons, can lead to humiliation for some children. And how the child feels that they are perceived by others, as Rosenberg (1989) discusses, is vital. Wiese- Bornstall (1997) suggests that children who have "lower perceptions of their sport ability" (p.2) are far more likely to withdraw from sports entirely. By simply dropping out, they are avoiding the possibility of being judged, because "With no attempt there can be no failure; with no failure, no humiliation" (James, 1892, p.187). This could be why 80% of the boys who did not belong to a team at Green Acre, also attended no extra-curricular activities. Then their 'inadequacy' could not be judged.

However pleasant the approach of the teachers, sporting activities, and particularly team games, will always produce 'winners and losers'. My lesson observations recorded the 'typical' students being left out during PE lessons, especially during team sports, here is an example:

Some players wandered about with their hands by their sides or in their pockets for a large portion of the 10 minute game. Some obvious 'footballers' dominated the game.

In no other subject are pupils prevented from working by the dominant ability of others, but unfortunately, in PE, that is exactly what can happen. Unless rigidly planned against, some students spent a great deal of their lessons 'hanging about' whilst they watched their more able peers perform.

Perhaps more effort could have been put into sessions to ensure that all pupils played an equally active part and that all had the opportunity to experience some kind of 'achievement'<sup>73</sup>. When the PE teachers did attempt to group the students by ability, so that they were more evenly matched, although they benefited from a much more inclusive activity, this was overshadowed for some by feelings of inadequacy. During one football session the group was split and the teacher attempted to discuss it as something positive. In response to the question of why they had been split one student answered, 'because they're all good football players and we're crap.' Although in this case it was done with good intentions, Marshall and Weinstein (1984) state that "social comparison is likely to produce feelings of inferiority, low aspirations, lack of motivation, interpersonal hostility, and competitiveness" (p.305). It appears that in spite of the positive approach taken by the teachers PE will always make incompetence far more visible than in other subjects; but perhaps if playing with peers of similar ability were the norm rather than an occasion, as the disgruntled student's comments suggest, it could be more easily accepted and enjoyed.

At times Green Acre appeared to be truly inclusive of those of all levels of physical ability. The 'marketing' of the school became structured around ideas of excellence and inclusion during my period of study at the school, with events like parents evening and Prize Givings being careful to promote both. Gymnastic and dance displays in particular used students of all abilities to maximum effect, but then these arenas do not have the same concept of team competitiveness

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<sup>73</sup> The 2002 Ofsted Report, when talking about inclusion and individual learning needs being met, does not mention PE (p.20).

that we find grounded in other sports<sup>74</sup>. It is difficult to comprehend how team sports can ever be truly inclusive of all abilities, and overcome the painful inadequacies that students feel. Sport is for winners, and perhaps worse than feeling inadequate is that those of average ability will simply feel overlooked by the teachers in the way that Tom, Year 12, described. It is difficult to imagine this subject area ever enhancing the self-esteem of *all abilities*, as the Government claims that it can.

The Year 9 and 10 Sports Questionnaire suggests a decline in the number of students that attended extra-curricular activities at Green Acre after being at the school for a year, and this was paralleled by those students showing an increased negativity towards physical activity in general. Most significant is the percentage of children who had switched from thinking that physical activity is 'okay', to saying that they did not like it at all. In the boys the increase was only 5%, but in the girls there was a notable rise of 17% in the sample.

The results for Y9 indicate a clear connection between belonging to a team and attending extra-curricular activities. (Although the much smaller number of Year 9s interviewed believed very strongly that you did *not* have to be good at sports to take part in extra-curricular activities). In order to explore this further I examined the results of the Year 9 Sports Questionnaire when the children were split into those that belonged and did not belong to a 'team'. This could be for any type of physical activity, inside or outside school. Girl team players were 28% more likely to say that they enjoyed physical activity at school

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<sup>74</sup> Krovetz (1999) comments that some alienated pupils may be very talented athletes in areas such as skateboarding or surfing, but not like the competitive nature of PE classes. They then feel that they are "shamed" for their non-competitive nature and resent the adoration of the school athletes. "They stop dressing for it and stop attending" (p.5).

'A lot' and boy team players were 40% more likely to enjoy it than those who did not belong to a team. What can be done to make physical activities at school just as enjoyable for the least able as the most? The knock-on effect of this 'team' membership is more notable within outside school activities. Girl team members were 33% more likely to become involved in clubs and activities outside school, but boys are 54% more likely. Team membership has a positive effect on participation in physical activity. The findings are of consequence; but whether schools should develop more teams with the aim of involving a wider section of their pupils and boost camaraderie, or less teams in order to eliminate competition, is an area that would require substantial exploration.

The results showed a significant trend, especially with regard to the boys not belonging to a team. It is this group that are least involved in any activities, even though they are four times more likely than the 'non-team' girls to say that they enjoy physical activity 'a lot' (at home). Those involved in a team were also over three times more likely to attend a lesson of some description outside school time. We must question, then, why the vast majority of this group of 'non-team boys' do not attend any clubs, despite their enjoyment of physical activity at home. It may be a pride aspect, whereby if you do not belong to the team, then there is no point attending. This would suggest that perhaps a 'less structured' approach to activities (reflecting the types of activities enjoyed at home) would be more apt for the 'non-team' boys. The fact that the most well attended extra-curricular activities are non-team, such as the fitness gym and self-defence, could be expanded upon.

It is the proportion of students that attend no extra-curricular activities at all that is most concerning, especially with regard to the boys. This indicates that

specific work needs to take place in stressing that extra-curricular activities are *not* for team members only. Or that a more serious investigation needs to take place into activities that would be enjoyed by all, and not just by those whom enjoy or are skilled in competitive sports.

### ***Whole School Inclusion***

The specialism was used extensively in marketing and Ball (2006) comments on the way that schools now “spend time, money and energy on impression management, marketing and promotion” (p.12) in order to ‘sell their wares’. The school prospectus used the boys’ sports victory as ideal ‘proof’ that the status was having an effect and the school website presented an obvious sports emphasis. There was a ‘push’ to make the sports specialism a priority during events such as prize givings, but it was evident that this was not the priority of the children. Where the head spent a great deal of time glorifying the school’s sporting success, the pupils preferred to remember the fun that they had had on field trips.

There were very mixed ideas about competition at Green Acre. When asked to rate qualities at the school, the teachers positioned competition as being of least importance. Yet competition was placed fourth in a hierarchy of school objectives on the school website, coming above even attendance. Whose priorities are on display here? Whilst giving an overview of the school’s specialism on their website, success in competition was the first thing mentioned out of eleven bullet points. Yet, day-to-day, the competitive culture between students that I had expected to find at Green Acre as a result of a ‘sporting ethos’ did not exist at all. All bar one of the Year Nine students that I interviewed

felt that just taking part was far more important than winning...and they felt that a 'just do your best' attitude predominated in all of their subjects.

A number of staff<sup>75</sup> commented that apathy, and a lack of desire to stand up and take credit for what they *have* achieved was more of a problem than competitiveness with the students. This was a culture that I had not come across in my literature review. Though proud of the achievements of their peers many students did not see this as relating in any way to them. This anomaly was evident in the diminished numbers attending the sports awards ceremonies, and was an issue raised in discussion by teachers at Green Acre a number of times. In the staff questionnaire five teachers made comment about the fact that the students did not take pride in their own achievements, even though the school provided many opportunities for talent to be showcased. Does this reflect a lack of the task-oriented approach, which pushes individuals to always better themselves without reverting to social comparison (Biddle and Fox, 1988) and a continued focus on more ego-oriented activities, where to 'win' is the only success?

Through all of the student interviews it came across very strongly that the pupils thought that they should simply try their best. There was no competitiveness, it was a truly inclusive atmosphere where the children worked at their own pace and teachers encouraged and supported them at that pace. If the children were poor writers, in their Health and Social Care session, they cut words out of magazines instead. Awards were given for trying hard, taking part and good attendance, in which fields all pupils were even. Gradually I came to question where the line should be drawn between inclusivity and apathy, and

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<sup>75</sup> In response to Questionnaire G.

whether all students were actually achieving their full potential. If it is perfectly acceptable for a child to achieve 'x', then why should that child push his or herself to achieve 'y' as well? It appeared that the focus remained firmly on outputs (Wallace, 1996) rather than learning processes and perhaps it would have been more beneficial at this school if the students were given more space to reflect on their learning (Ball, 2006) and to set themselves their own, achievable, targets for success.

The Year Nine interviews are a good example of the apathy of some students. It was good that the pupils did not perceive extreme pressure to attend them, but it is a shame that few more than half bothered, or perhaps, were encouraged to, fulfil their commitment. If the focus of education were to be averted from prescribed success criteria and more towards a desire to create students who are able to critically evaluate norms and values (Carr and Harnett, 1996) then we would hope to see more autonomous individuals with a greater sense of responsibility<sup>76</sup>. To turn away from more bureaucratic measures of success to more social ones would have been ideal for a school like Green Acre. The argument of theorists such as Tarrant and Tarrant (2004) is that by creating a society of more responsible, 'civil' youths, we are creating a society that is more eager to study and to work. At Green Acre it appeared that a lack of pressure sometimes became synonymous with simply not bothering. This brings to mind the student's view of Earlybird Clubs; that as the teachers were so late getting them started it was simply not worthwhile attending. A clear line needs to be drawn between being inclusive and relaxed and simply being lax.

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<sup>76</sup> This may, then, result, in more students choosing to participate in higher education.



Although the terms ‘inclusion and excellence’ were paid much lip service during the head teacher’s speeches, the pride of the school ultimately lay in success at competition. In the school prospectus the boys’ success takes pride of place as a school sub-heading and on the school website, in reply to “What is happening in Green Acre in PE and Sport?” we are not told about health, nutrition or increased numbers of students developing active lifestyles. Instead, the first of eleven bullet points is: “The school is succeeding in District, County and National competitions in a range of sports”. But, let’s be honest, when it comes to sport, who is *really* concerned with those who just ‘took part’?

### ***Summary***

The fact that there was no shared culture evident at the school seriously impeded my investigation into how a specialism in sports would affect that culture, and so forced me to re-assess my original research questions. The data revealed that there were pertinent issues influencing the education of the pupils at this school, and for them these issues significantly overshadowed the introduction of the school specialism. And these issues were, in fact, very much connected to the fragmented culture of the school. I also discovered very significant barriers to a school creating a culture around one subject specialism, when many staff had a limited understanding of, passion for or involvement in developing that subject. I explore these areas in some depth in the following chapter.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

#### ***Overview***

In this final chapter I intend to synthesise the key findings of the thesis; exploring the issues subsequently raised in order to examine their relevance to the current educational climate, making recommendations for further Specialist School policy and practice. I explore some of the incongruencies between policy and practice that my research revealed and develop some emergent, fuzzy generalisations about the lived effects of subject specialisms in schools. I go on to highlight areas for future academic research in education. Finally I question the appropriateness of the Case Study method in our current educational climate.

#### ***Policy in practice revealed***

It is clear that this research is representative of a very specific moment in educational history, and one which is now, in this rapidly developing policy arena, somewhat outdated. Yet it still holds valuable lessons to be learnt in terms of policy development and the divergence of macro-policy and micro-practice. It also makes clear that what may be ‘the answer’ for the development of some schools, becomes nothing more than an additional burden and bone of contention for those schools for which ‘the fix’ is simply not appropriate. It is impossible to now place this research within the parameters of more recent research as it would not be appropriate to the development of ideas and practices that were evolving within the research setting between 2001 and 2004. Instead we must take it as an historical occurrence from which a number of lessons may be learned.

The evidence suggests that at Green Acre there was an extremely fractured culture, contrary to the “clear mission and ethos” (DfEE, 2001, p.11) that the Government envisaged a specialism creating. This appears to be a result of the highly scrutinised environment in which teachers now work, where individual teacher accountability overrides the need to look forward and to plan as a team. This could be seen both whole school and within the individual department where the majority of this study was based. The stress that the Government has placed upon creating a ‘whole school ethos’ as a facet of the development of the specialist school, is being buried underneath the need for each individual teacher to ‘perform’, and the introduction of a staff development pro-forma along the lines of business requirements. Teaching has become based on, “the twin pillars of accountability (inspection, test scores, league tables) and standards (target setting, monitoring, raising achievement plans)” (Harris and Ranson, 2005, p.573). Grace (1987) commented on the effect that legislature emerging from central government was having on teachers in terms of a, “steady erosion of teacher’s professional autonomy, and certainly of any remaining sense of partnership in education” (p.217). The loyalty that teachers have felt towards schools in the past is becoming pushed out by administered performativity. Excellence in teaching will not be nurtured whilst teachers are treated as no more than facilitators of government policy. Pressures such as these appeared to be having a far more marked effect on Green Acre than the school’s specialism.

There appeared to be a shadow of a ‘caring school’ culture at Green Acre, which had existed prior to the school’s specialism. But the introduction of the specialism seems to have added to the deterioration of that culture.

Because of the many demands experienced by all staff, the 'handing out' of bonuses to one chosen department could only cause resentment amongst those who were overlooked. Many staff at Green Acre found it very difficult to look beyond the individual demands placed upon them, and to look forward to what the specialism might offer the school as a whole, and so the whole school ethos remained untouched by the specialism. I think that it would be naïve to suggest that this problem existed at this school alone.

I believe that the fact that the majority of staff had no involvement in Green Acre's application for specialist status dampened the potential impact that the specialism may have had on the school culture. Staff from other departments felt that they were offered no voice during the development of the specialism, yet they were still expected to support it during specialist events. Ball (1987) stressed that for any whole school change to be successful *all* staff need to be involved from day one. The fact that they were not at Green Acre, as research would suggest appears to be the case in many schools (Sinkinson, 2006) caused some staff to feel quite indignant about the situation. All staff being far more involved from an early stage may well have eradicated much of the ill feeling and dissention caused later on, and should be considered as a condition of a school's application for specialist status.

But then the extent to which teachers can become involved in a 'foreign' subject remains debatable. Government educationalists need to consider the far-reaching effects of a *whole school* specialism in just *one* subject. Ironically, if the focus of a 'sporting' specialism were instead shifted to one of physical health and fitness, then this specialism could potentially be more truly inclusive, and of more benefit to all staff and pupils, than any other. Instead, at this school at

least, insufficient steps have been taken to prevent the school's specialism from being equated with sporting, and thus exclusive, success. If specialisms are to remain in the hands of the experts in that subject alone, then the rhetoric surrounding its' changing the 'whole school culture' needs to be removed from policy.

If not for the Government's fixation with statistical results, how much more useful would it have been for this school to have focused, perhaps, on health and well-being? Within this a healthy cafeteria and more non-competitive physical activities could have been introduced, but the area of self-perception could also have been developed. The barriers preventing students from achieving could have been broken down by focusing on task-mastery, by discovering which subjects pupils would *enjoy* taking, focusing on more vocational elements and, as a consequence, combating absenteeism and poor behaviour by boosting self-esteem. The Government has decided that the comprehensive approach of a 'one size fits all' education does not work, yet it is still forcing a blanket subject specialism on all schools in order for them to obtain much needed funding. This cannot possibly meet the diverse needs of all schools.

The visible effects of the specialism on the whole school were minimal. There was no heightened interest in sports, health and fitness school-wide, and the specialism was most often viewed as just being a 'tag on', something to do with the PE department, who were physically detached from the school anyway. Most non-PE teaching staff did not feel that they had benefited from the specialism and the majority of pupils interviewed did not see that their school was different to any other. Money had been invested into additional PE staff and

resources, but, if the results of my questionnaire and interviews are any indication, opinions toward physical activity did not seem to have changed, and attainment had not changed. The PE results were still below average and the subject was still not achieving set targets. And of more concern is the fact that there is strong evidence to suggest that student attitudes towards good health and physical activity had actually *declined* after pupils had been at the school for a year, despite our expectations that a SSC would have a positive effect. So why, exactly, was this subject chosen as the school specialism and where, exactly had all of the funding gone? This did not appear to be the centre of excellence that the Government claimed would be created by a specialism.

As there was no tangible whole-school ethos emanating from the school's sports specialism, it became impossible to deduce whether that ethos was based on inclusion or elitism, and whether that ethos was having any affect on the self-perception of the pupils, as per my original questions. Instead my exploration of attitudes towards inclusion or excellence became more general, exploring individual views of the concepts and observing the teaching approaches in lessons. Student perceptions of this were explored in interviews.

As my data suggest, the school gave out very 'mixed messages' where inclusion and excellence were concerned. Though the head teacher frequently stressed the prioritisation of both areas, this was somewhat overshadowed by repeated references to sporting success. During no public occasion was student participation in physical activity lauded as an area of achievement. In PE lessons students were repeatedly 'left out' of team games because they did not have the confidence to play against more able opponents. Yet when the teacher purposely grouped the boys in teams of similar ability, students were upset by

perceiving themselves as being on the 'crap' team. This strongly suggested that the grouping of the boys by ability in this instance was tokenistic and not the norm, and showed that methods of approaching inclusion need to be culturally embedded and not 'dipped in and out of'. With a more constant grouping of pupils in 'teams' within which they are able to compete and achieve, the positive sense of camaraderie classically associated with team sports would be given more opportunity to grow. And my results reflected how the social element of belonging to a team encouraged young people to take part in significantly more physical activity.

There was no evidence of the lowered self-perception due to poor sporting ability that I had feared that the sporting specialism would create, but there was evidence of boys yearning for the attention that some members of school teams gained from teaching staff. There was a perception that the most talented were the most favoured and that those who didn't do sports were 'ignored'. It was also perceived by some that teams were elitist and that opportunities to get into them were extremely limited. But this was not across the board. Some students perceived no pressure to competitively 'succeed' at all and that just trying your best was perfectly acceptable, but this also piqued my concern, as I discuss shortly.

In 1997 PE was not named within the seven areas where there was regular good teaching at Green Acre. In 2002 three *other* subjects were those named where teaching and learning was most effective. If we are to justly assume that this is not the only 'specialist' school in England in which the specialist subject is not really, well, special, we need to question where the fault lies. Could it be in the application process not being rigorous enough and

allowing through targets that are far too ambitious? And could this, then, be tempered by a wider array of staff being involved in the application process? We must also question whether there needs to be a closer monitoring of Specialist Schools to ensure that their additional funding is being implemented in the most efficacious ways. It would seem that the Government needs to find some means of measuring the effect that a school specialism is having on the culture of a school that is not related to increased GCSE results, and as HCESC suggested in 2003, to more adequately explore the concept of 'added benefits'.

Inevitably the temptation is to go full circle to the opening statements of this thesis and to ask why the funding isn't simply being given to the most needy schools for the resources that they are most desperate for. Is it not fair to say on the basis of this evidence that the massive amount of money inputted into the Sports Specialism at Green Acre could have been put to far better use?

### ***Areas for Further Investigation***

As has already been stated, this research generated far more questions than answers, and there are numerous avenues emerging from it that could be explored as a consequence. I have already made the suggestion that a wider cross-section of staff be involved in the application process, and I would be interested to see the effect that this had.

Another fascinating area was the pupils, and especially the boys' equation of sports with team membership. Despite the best intentions of the staff, many pupils held on to their belief that team sports were for team players, and not just for fun. To take part in sport you had to be good at it. How can this hurdle ever be overcome? The fact will always remain that in physical activity prowess cannot be hidden and there is constant comparison. It was a significant



finding that at Green Acre by far the highest percentage of pupils who did not attend any extra curricular activities was those boys who did not belong to a team. They simply opted out in order to avoid that, “social comparison...likely to produce feelings of inferiority, low aspirations, lack of motivation, interpersonal hostility, and competitiveness” (Marshall and Weinstein, 1984, p.305). Literacy is an area where boys have historically struggled more than girls, yet they do not go to such great lengths to avoid this, as The Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (1997) discovered. The social comparison aspect of PE is an area that requires further investigation, and using qualitative means. It is good to know the figures of children truanting from certain lessons, but it is far more helpful to us, if we are to change educational agendas for the benefit of our children, to know exactly ‘why?’

Though the primary tenet of my research was to hear the staff and the student’s voices, it was very difficult to extract information from many students, as they were, quite simply, unused to being asked for their own opinion. As I have already discussed, I felt, most often, that the pupils were trying to ‘suss out’ what they thought I wanted to hear, to give the ‘correct’ answer. When discussing their future with them, many had not formed goals. With most of the pupils there was no forward vision, they lived in the present. This can be related to the lack of time and space given for children to ponder their own education and the value of it to them. By this I refer to the type of “culture of learning” that the DfES (1998) toyed with briefly in their Green Paper, *The Learning Age*. This paper took a more holistic approach to education, stressing that our aim should be to develop children who have “personal independence, creativity and innovation” (p.10) but was subsequently dismissed. As a result of this research I

am convinced that encouraging children to explore and create a 'culture of learning' as opposed to the existing culture of 'ticking boxes' would have a drastic effect on students' ability and their willingness to fulfil their potential.

Academies now seem to be incorporating some of those ideals that were dismissed ten years ago. Perhaps an Academy would have been far more relevant in this geographical situation. Academies, introduced during the life of this study, offer a far more flexible approach to learning. They represent the Government's drive to raise standards in disadvantaged areas where the youths have, historically, had a poor deal. It was predicted that by September 2008 there would be at least one Academy in each of the 100 most deprived districts in England. Although Academies need to follow traditional, National Curriculum pro-formas in English, Maths, ICT and Science, the remainder of their courses can be adapted to suit the specific needs of their cohort. The DCSF say:

Governors and senior managers of the Academies have the opportunity to develop a curriculum to meet the needs of the individual pupils in their school...The outcomes expected are not simply good examination results but also young people superbly equipped for active citizenship; committed to lifelong learning; and, ready for progression into further and higher education and work.

([www.standards.dfes.gov.uk](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk), accessed 06/06/08)

Perhaps the concepts of *The Learning Age* are finally filtering through, albeit in the modern guise of a type of specialist school. Considering that most Academies are set up in order to replace existing underperforming schools, the fact that one was graded as 'outstanding' in every aspect, suggests that there is some good practice that needs to be recognised and replicated.

The importance that the pupils involved in this research placed on their relationships with teaching staff cannot be ignored, just as we cannot ignore the fact that there was a very high turnover rate in the teaching staff, preventing the formation of lasting relationships. Why were the staff at this school so

demoralised and why was the turnover rate so high?<sup>77</sup> Was it due to inherent difficulties at this school, or is it an issue that is nationwide? Teacher satisfaction and retention is another key question for continued investigation.

The decline in the involvement of parents was an interesting and tricky area. It would be helpful to explore whether this was due to a deterioration in parenting skills or whether it was a result of the 'closed fortress' mentality that now badgers the highly scrutinised arena of the school. Do parents no longer want to be so involved to so great an extent or do they feel pushed out? If parents feel that they are not welcome at school, then educationalists need to know the reasons so that they can begin tackling them. If some parents simply have no inclination to become involved in their children's education, then the Government needs to consider ways and means of altering this mindset. It may be that schools are so overburdened by administration that they no longer have the time to ensure that parents play an active role in their child's education. Fortunately the importance of parents' involvement in their children's education has now been raised (DfES, 2007), but how parents feel about their involvement is still a fascinating area for further research. Again this is information that would be empty in the form of statistics alone and it is vital that it be approached from an ethnomethodological viewpoint.

Considering the marked effect that it was having at this school, it would be remiss of me not to call for a thorough investigation into the decline in student behaviour within schools. It is an easy option to comment that pupil behaviour is merely a reflection of society, but in some of the poorer socio-economic areas the behaviour within school can be excellent. Before all

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<sup>77</sup> It appears that a high turnover rate in staff was not idiosyncratic to this school, Houlihan and Wong (2005) found that 10% of SSCs saw staff turnover as a problem (p.8).

students are able to fulfil their potential the barriers that are caused by poor behaviour need to be overcome. In-depth Case Studies are needed in schools that are 'getting it right' in order to explore their methods, but I acknowledge some of the difficulties inherent in a Case Study approach to research in the next section.

My fears that Green Acre High School, if based on a sporting culture, may become overly competitive and exclusive were unfounded; as the overriding culture was a mixture of inclusion and apathy. I approached this research with an extremely elevated view of inclusion, but at the completion of the work I began to question just how much an education without high expectations was actually benefiting these pupils. I would question whether inclusion should stretch to overlooking refusals and rudeness from pupils, just as I would question whether inclusion should stretch to commitments not being carried through (for example the commitment to attend an interview, or for staff to ensure that advertised clubs are run at stated times). I began to question whether the inclusive attitude of not letting the children have to worry about 'trivialities' that existed at Green Acre, was more a case of the lowering standards rather than a remedy for those who struggled. This research has caused me to question whether schools should begin to look at inclusion differently; for fear that something that was based on an extremely positive premise has slipped into something that is far more negative. How different schools define (if they do at all), and how they subsequently approach inclusion, and which approaches are most effective in practice, are questions that warrant ethnomethodologically driven research attention.

### ***The Feasibility of Performing Case Study Research in Schools***

All of the questions that this research has raised are embedded within the culture of the school. All of these avenues, which would prove fascinating paths for future research, would require the sensitive and thorough collection of largely qualitative data, ideally through a Case Study approach. I remain doubtful whether answers would easily be found though, as schools and their staff increasingly place barriers between themselves and those who have potential to find fault with their 'enterprise'. Flynn, in James (2004) comments:

As researchers, we hold up a mirror of critical reflection and theoretical insights, which we know will be disruptive of tutor's deeply held, often tacit, beliefs about their site. (p.43)

Schools and their staff are now in a far more precarious position than they have ever been before and cannot run the risk of being seen as 'failing' in any area. Now that state schools are required to undergo the scrutiny of regular inspections and now that the accountability of teachers has been increased, they are far more wary about their position. Why would they want any one else visiting their school and questioning their actions, if it can possibly be avoided?

How can schools remain convinced that there is value in research that explores the implementation of Government policy, and be able to disengage their quest for knowledge from their desire for personal protection? Morris (in James, 2004) suggests the necessity for more collaborative practice between practitioner and researcher if "research is to have greater impact on educational practice" (p.vii). Gone are the glorious eighties when the likes of Steven Ball could have a cigarette in the staffroom and chat to the teachers whilst the pupils entertained themselves. Now schools carefully choose pieces of structured research that will glorify their strengths.

It may be that there is no longer a place for the ethnomethodological approach as education becomes streamlined along the 'tick box' and 'results' mentality (Solvason, 2005b). Researchers will only be allowed into schools in order to explore 'successes' and will not be permitted to investigate 'the average' for fear of faults being brought to light. After enduring the rather painful experience of performing research amidst conflicting agendas I believe that we, as researchers, need to allow practitioners to become far more central in deciding where research will lead. By working in partnership we can ensure that collaboration will transparently, and immediately benefit the practitioners that we work with as well as influencing Government policy.

## **Appendices**

**Appendix A:** Year 9's brief SSC questionnaire

**Appendix B:** Year 9's sports questionnaire

**Appendix C:** Year 10 follow-up to Year 9 questionnaire

**Appendix D:** Year 8's sports questionnaire

**Appendix E:** Feeder school's teacher questionnaire

**Appendix F:** Short staff ethos questionnaire

**Appendix G:** Long staff ethos questionnaire

**Appendix H:** Governing Body questionnaire

**Appendix I:** Teachers' suggestions for improving behaviour

**Appendix J:** Governors' response

**Appendix K:** The effects of the Ofsted inspection

Appendix A: Year 9's brief SSC questionnaire

**What do YOU think?**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

In the sections below write your opinions about each of the headings. It can be just a word, a phrase or a sentence.

**I came to Green Acre because:**

**Being at a Specialist Sports College is good because:**

**One thing I can do here that I couldn't do at my old school is:**

**Sport is good for you because:**

**I enjoy sport because:**



**Appendix B: Year 9's sports questionnaire**

# Sports Questionnaire

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Form: \_\_\_\_\_

Like it or hate it, this questionnaire lets you have your say about physical activity. Your opinions could influence what happens in your school, so be honest!

If you are given a choice of answers please circle the one that applies most to you (unless instructed otherwise). You do not have to answer all of the questions, if you think that a question is too personal then you are perfectly entitled to leave it out.

## All about you

1 Are you a boy or a girl? Girl Boy

2 How old are you? Years

3 What is your height? (In cms or   
feet and inches)

4 What is your weight? (In kg   
or stones and pounds)

5 Does your family have a religion? Yes No  
What is that religion?

6 Who do you live with at home? (*If it varies, please state, e.g. Mum during week, Dad at weekends*)


7 How far away from school do you live? (*Please circle one*)

- a) Less than a mile
- b) One-two miles
- c) More than two miles

How did you get to school today?

8 Are you allowed a free school dinner if you'd like one?  
(*Please circle*)

Yes

No

9 How much do you think these people enjoy being physically active? (*Please tick a box for each*)

	Not at all	A little	A lot
Mother (or stepmother)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Father (or stepfather)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Older brother/s	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Older sister/s	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Form tutor	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

10 How much do you enjoy physical activity?

(*Please circle an answer for each one*)

i) Physical activities **at home**? ( E.g. Riding your bike, sports clubs, aerobic classes)

A lot    Quite a lot    A little    Not at all

ii) PE, games and extra-curricular physical activities **at school**?

A lot    Quite a lot    A little    Not at all

11 What do you most enjoy during PE and Games at school?

What do you least enjoy?

12 Do you think that your PE and Games teachers are:

- a) Enthusiastic about PE
  - b) Knowledgeable about PE
  - c) Helping you to get better at PE
  - d) Helping you to enjoy PE
- (Please tick the sentences that apply)*

13 How many extra-curricular sports clubs do you attend *in school*? If none, please state.

If you *do* attend a club *in school*/which is your favourite and why?

Club because

14 What do you think of the choice of extra-curricular sporting activities available at your school?

Plenty to choose from

Quite a lot of choice, but not everything you'd like

Not enough activities to choose from

Nothing that you're interested in

*( Please tick one sentence that applies )*

15 If you could add one more sporting activity to the list already available at your school, what would it be?

16 W  in, in your own time? (*At home or in school clubs*) Circle a number for each activity.

*Never      Occasionally      Once a week      More than once a week*

- Aerobics.....1.....2.....3.....4.....
- Basketball.....1.....2.....3.....4.....
- Dancing.....1.....2.....3.....4.....
- Cricket.....1.....2.....3.....4.....
- Golf.....1.....2.....3.....4.....
- Football.....1.....2.....3.....4.....
- Riding your bike.....1.....2.....3.....4.....
- Skateboarding or Rollerblading.....1.....2.....3.....4.....
- Hockey.....1.....2.....3.....4.....
- Badminton.....1.....2.....3.....4.....
- Gymnastics.....1.....2.....3.....4.....
- Rugby.....1.....2.....3.....4.....
- Going for walks.....1.....2.....3.....4.....
- Martial Arts.....1.....2.....3.....4.....
- Running.....1.....2.....3.....4.....
- Horse - riding.....1.....2.....3.....4.....
- Netball.....1.....2.....3.....4.....
- Swimming.....1.....2.....3.....4.....
- Tennis.....1.....2.....3.....4.....
- Squash.....1.....2.....3.....4.....

Please write any other activities that you take part in regularly in the box below.

17 Do you belong to any teams?

*In school*

Yes

No

*Outside school*

Yes

No

18 If you answered yes to number 13, what teams are those?

--

19 Have any of your teachers ever encouraged you to attend a sports club outside school?

Yes

No

20 Do the adults that you live with encourage you to attend extra-curricular sports clubs, or clubs outside school?

Yes

No

21 Do any of the adults that you live with take part in regular physical activity/ sports?

Yes

No

i) If you answered yes, what physical activities do they do?


ii) If you answered no, did they used to take part in physical activities/sports when they were younger?

Yes

No

Don't know

22 Name three things that you spent time doing after school yesterday. (E.g. *reading a book, watching television, going to a club or a lesson*)


23 About how long did you spend doing homework last night?

24 After school last week, which clubs, inside or outside school, did you go to? (e.g. *youth club, swimming, guides*) If none, please write none.


25 Do you attend any lessons (e.g. *piano, swimming*) outside school? Yes No

If you answered yes, what lessons are they?

--

How many of those involved you being physically active?

26 How many times last week did you exercise and have to breathe harder? (*Please circle one number*)

Not at all.....1

Once.....2

A few times.....3

Lots of times.....4

27 How physically fit do you think you are? (*Please circle one number*)

Very unfit.....1

Unfit.....2

Not sure.....3

Fit.....4

Very fit.....5

28 Who will usually ask you about your school day?  
( Please circle each number that applies )

Parents.....1  
Older brothers and sisters.....2  
Grandparents.....3  
No one.....4

269 How much would you say that you enjoy school?  
( Please circle one answer )

I don't enjoy it at all.....1  
School's okay.....2  
I enjoy school.....3  
I really enjoy school.....4

30 What did you eat or drink before coming to school  
today? (Please list)


31 Do you ever feel tired at school? (Please circle one on each  
line)

i) **In the morning**          never    sometimes    often    always

ii) **In the afternoon**    never    sometimes    often    always

32 How much does your school teach you that physical activity  
are good for you?

Not at all          A little          Quite a lot          A lot

**33 Please circle an answer for each of the questions below**

Do you think that your friends like to hear your ideas? Yes No Don't know

Do you sometimes feel lonely at school? Yes No Don't know

Are there lots of things about you that you would like to change? Yes No Don't know

Do you feel embarrassed giving an answer in class? Yes No Don't know

Do you ever feel afraid about going to school? Yes No Don't know

Do you often feel proud of things that you've done? Yes No Don't know

31 If there were one thing about your school that you could change what would it be?


Thank you so much for filling in this questionnaire.  
It may be that I would like to speak with you a little more about some of your views, if that would be okay then please tick the 'yes' box. If you would rather not discuss your views with me then please tick the 'no' box.

*Carla Solvason*

Yes

No

☐☐



**Appendix C:** Year 10 follow-up to Year 9 questionnaire

# Sports Questionnaire

You will have filled in a questionnaire very similar to this last year. We would now like to see if any of your views have changed after a year at Arrow Vale High School.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Form: \_\_\_\_\_

1 How much do you think your form tutor enjoys being physically active?  
(Please circle one)      Not at all      A little      A lot

2 How much do you enjoy physical activity?  
(Please circle an answer for each one )

i) Physical activities at home? ( E.g. Riding your bike, sports clubs, aerobic classes)      A lot      Quite a lot      A little      Not at all

ii) PE, games and extra-curricular physical activities at school?      A lot      Quite a lot      A little      Not at all

What do you most enjoy during PE and Games at school?

What do you least enjoy?

Do you think that your PE and Games teachers are:

- e) Enthusiastic about PE
  - f) Knowledgeable about PE
  - g) Helping you to get better at PE
  - h) Helping you to enjoy PE
- (Please tick the sentences that apply)

How many extra-curricular sports related clubs do you attend *in school*? If none please state. (0)

If you *do* attend a club *in school*/which is your favourite and why?

8 What do you think of the choice of extra-curricular sporting activities available at your school?

Plenty to choose from

Quite a lot of choice, but not everything you'd like

Not enough activities to choose from

Nothing that you're interested in

*(Please tick one sentence that applies)*

If you could add one more sporting activity to the list already available at your school, what would it be?

9 Do you belong to any teams?

*In school*

Yes

No

*Outside school*

Yes

No

10 If you answered yes to number 13, what teams are those?

11 Have any of your teachers ever encouraged you to attend a sports club outside school?

Yes

No

12 Do the adults that you live with encourage you to attend extra-curricular sports clubs, or clubs outside school?

Yes

No

13 Do the adults that you live with take part in any physical activity/sports?

Yes

No

i) If you answered yes, what physical activities do they do?

14 Name three things that you spent time doing after school yesterday (e.g. reading a book, watching television, going to a club or a lesson).

--

15 About how long did you spend doing homework last night?

--

 mins

16 After school last week, which clubs, inside or outside school, did you go to? (E.g. youth club, swimming, guides) if none, please write none.


17 Do you attend any lessons (e.g. piano, swimming) outside school?

Yes                      No

If you answered yes, what lessons are they?

--

18 How many times last week did you exercise and have to breathe harder? (Please circle one number)

Not at all.....1

Once.....2

A few times.....3

Lots of times.....4

19 How physically fit do you think you are? (Please circle one number)

Very unfit.....1

Unfit.....2

Not sure.....3

Fit.....4

Very fit.....5

20 How much would you say that you enjoy school?  
( Please circle one answer)

I don't enjoy it at all.....1  
 School's okay.....2  
 I enjoy school.....3  
 I really enjoy school.....4

21 Do you ever feel tired at school? ( *Please circle one on each line* )

i) In the morning      never    sometimes    often    always  
 ii) In the afternoon    never    sometimes    often    always

22 How much does your school teach you that physical activities are good for you?

Not at all      A little      Quite a lot      A lot

23 ***Please circle an answer for each of the questions below***

Do you think that your friends like to hear your ideas?      Yes    No    Don't know

Do you sometimes feel lonely at school? Yes    No    Don't know

Are there lots of things about you that you would like to change?      Yes    No    Don't know

Do you feel embarrassed giving an answer in class?      Yes    No    Don't know

Do you ever feel afraid about going to school?      Yes    No    Don't know

Do you often feel proud of things that you've done?      Yes    No    Don't know

24 If there were one thing about your school that you could change what would it be?



Thank you very much for taking the time to fill in this questionnaire. If you return it promptly then you will earn a merit.      Carla Solvason

# Sports Questionnaire

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

This is your chance to let your next school know all about you. You do not have to answer all of the questions, if you think that a question is too personal then you are perfectly entitled to leave it out.

## All about you

1 Are you a boy or a girl? *Please circle* Girl Boy

2 How old are you? Years

Who do you live with most of the time at home?

4 How did you get to school today?

5 Are you allowed a free school dinner if you'd like one?  
(*Please circle*) Yes No

6 How much do you enjoy physical activity?  
(*Please circle an answer for each one*)

i) Physical activities at home? ( E.g. Riding your bike, sports clubs, aerobic classes)

A lot Quite a lot A little Not at all

ii) PE, games and extra-curricular physical activities at school?  
A lot    Quite a lot    A little    Not at all

7 What do you most enjoy during PE and Games at school?

8 What do you least enjoy?

9 Do you think that your PE and Games teachers:  
**Please circle one for each**

i) Enjoy PE ?	Yes	No
j) Know a lot about PE?	Yes	No
k) Help you to get better at PE?	Yes	No
l) Help you to enjoy PE?	Yes	No

10 How many sports clubs do you attend at school?

If you *do* attend a club *in school*/which is your favourite and why?  Club because

11 If you could add one more sporting activity to those already available at your school, what would it be?

12 Which of these activities do you take part in **outside of school time**? Please circle any that you do **at least once a week**:

- Aerobics

- Basketball
- Dancing
- Cricket
- Golf
- Football
- Riding your bike
- Skateboarding or Rollerblading
- Hockey
- Badminton
- Gymnastics
- Rugby
- Going for walks
- Martial Arts
- Running
- Horse -riding
- netball
- Swimming
- Tennis
- Squash

Please write any other activities not yet mentioned that you take part in regularly in the box below.

13 Do you belong to any teams? *Please circle one for each*

<i>In school</i>	Yes	No
<i>Outside school</i>	Yes	No

14 If you answered yes to number 13, what teams are those?

15 Have any of your teachers ever encouraged you to attend a sports club outside school? *Please circle*      Yes      No

16 Do the adults that you live with encourage you to attend extra-curricular sports clubs, or clubs outside school? *Please circle* Yes No

17 Do any of the adults that you live with take part in regular physical activity/ sports? *Please circle* Yes No

If you answered yes, what physical activities do they do?


18 Name three things that you spent time doing after school yesterday. (E.g. *reading a book, watching television, going to a club or a lesson*)


19 About how long did you spend doing homework last night?  

--

 Mins

20 Do you attend any lessons ( e.g. *piano, swimming* ) outside school? *Please circle* Yes NO

If you answered yes, what lessons are they?

--

21 How many times last week did you exercise and have to breathe harder? (*Please circle one number*)

Not at all.....1  
Once.....2  
A few times.....3  
Lots of times.....4



22 How physically fit do you think you are? (*Please circle one number*)

Very unfit.....1  
Unfit.....2  
Not sure.....3  
Fit.....4  
Very fit.....5

23 Who will usually ask you about your school day?  
( *Please tick each one that applies* )

Parents

☐

Older brothers and sisters

☐

Grandparents

☐

No one

☐

24 How much would you say that you enjoy school?  
( *Please circle one answer* )

I don't enjoy it at all.....1

School's okay.....2

I enjoy school.....3

I really enjoy school.....4

25 What did you eat or drink before coming to school today? (*Please list*)


26 Do you ever feel tired at school? (*Please circle one on each line*)

i) In the morning .....never      sometimes      often      always

ii) In the afternoon.....never      sometimes      often      always

27 How much does your school teach you that physical activity is good for you? *Please circle an answer*

Not at all      A little      Quite a lot      A lot

28 *Please circle an answer for each of the questions below*

Do you think that your friends like to hear your ideas?      Yes      No      Don't know

Do you sometimes feel lonely at school?      Yes      No      Don't know

Are there lots of things about you that you would like to change?      Yes      No      Don't know

Do you feel embarrassed giving an answer in class?      Yes      No      Don't know

Do you ever feel afraid about going to school?      Yes      No      Don't know

Do you often feel proud of things that you've done?      Yes      No      Don't know

29 If there were one thing about your school that you could change what would it be?


**Thank you for your time and we look forward to seeing you at Green Acre!**

**Appendix E:** Feeder school's teacher questionnaire

19/10/01

Dear Sir or Madam,

I am a research student at UCW undertaking a study of Green Acre High School. The research (jointly funded by UCW, Green Acre and the LEA) will look at the impact made by Green Acre becoming a SSC.

One of Green Acre's targets has been to support the schools in its 'pyramid'. As your school comes within that pyramid, I would be interested in hearing your views.

I have enclosed a questionnaire (and SAE) which I hope that you will take a few minutes to complete. If you would prefer to discuss the situation on the telephone, I will contact you if the questionnaire is not returned.

Thank you very much for your time, I realise how busy you are,

Carla Solvason

Direct line: 01905 855377 or e-mail: [c.solvason@worc.ac.uk](mailto:c.solvason@worc.ac.uk)

*Please circle the most appropriate answer*

1 Were you aware that Green Acre had become a SSC?

Yes                      No                      Not sure

2 Has Green Acre offered you any training to improve the delivery of Physical Education in your school?

Yes                      No                      Not sure

3 Has Green Acre offered you any resources (equipment, facilities or staff support) to improve the delivery of Physical Education in your school?

Yes                      No  
Not sure

4 Has Green Acre passed on any information or 'tips' to you that might enhance Physical Education in your school?

Yes                      No                      Not sure

5 Have any staff from Green Acre been to visit your school to discuss physical education issues?

Yes                      No                      Not sure

6 Do you think that Green Acre's new status has had any real effect on your school?

Yes                      No                      Not sure

7 Is there any training you feel that your school needs, which you think that Green Acre may be able to supply?

Yes  
No

If you answered yes, could you please specify:

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## Appendix F: Short staff ethos questionnaire

### Green Acre 'Ethos' Questionnaire

All Staff

Government documentation stresses that as a SSC it is important that Green Acre develops its own distinctive 'ethos' or identity. Do you think that the school already has one? Do you have an opinion on what that ethos should be?

Your comments are extremely valuable to my research. Could you please spare five minutes to fill in the following questionnaire?

Many thanks, Carla Solvason

1. Do you think that Arrow Vale has its own distinctive ethos?    Y       N  
*Please circle*

2. If you answered yes, what is that ethos?

---

3. If you have been here for two years or more, do you think that the ethos of the school has changed since it gained SSC status?

Y       N

4. If you answered yes, in what way? \_\_\_\_\_

5. Please circle a number on each line to show how you feel about the following statements.

	Disagree strongly 1	Disagree 2	Not sure 3	Agree 4	Agree strongly 5
The curriculum provides for all levels of ability.	1	2	3	4	5
Passing tests well is the most important thing at school	1	2	3	4	5
Children should be encouraged to compete.	1	2	3	4	5

Disagree strongly	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Agree strongly
1	2	3	4	5

Relationships between staff are friendly and supportive.	1	2	3	4	5
The pupils show respect for staff.	1	2	3	4	5
Progress should be recognised and praised (whatever the level).	1	2	3	4	5
The pupils encourage and help one another.	1	2	3	4	5
The school is kept clean and well presented.	1	2	3	4	5
Teaching staff take an interest in and support events in departments other than their own.	1	2	3	4	5

6. Please number these statements in order of importance, with 1 being the most and 4 the least important.

School should provide all children with the opportunity to achieve success.

School should provide children with the qualifications needed to be successful in later life.

School should teach children how important it is to do better, or at least as well as others.

School should teach children to always try their hardest and do their best.

*Thank you very much for your time. When I have received your completed questionnaires I will give you back a summary of everyone's answers- it might be of interest to you.*

*If you have any questions/ queries please do not hesitate to contact me at [c.solvason@worc.ac.uk](mailto:c.solvason@worc.ac.uk), or 01905 855377.*

## Appendix G: Long staff ethos questionnaire

### Staff 'Ethos/ Culture' Interviews

Dept: \_\_\_\_\_

Position: \_\_\_\_\_

Most answers to this questionnaire require a simple yes/ no answer. Rather than only giving that option I have put a line, so that you can answer in any way that you deem appropriate.

1. How long have you been employed at Green Acre? (Approximately)

\_\_\_\_\_

2. Have you previously worked at other schools? \_\_\_\_\_

3. If you answered yes, what is the main difference between Green Acre and previous schools that you've worked at?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

#### ***The following questions all relate to your post at Green Acre***

4. Do you think that relationships between management and teaching staff are positive and productive?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. Do you feel that the management of the school values your opinion?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6. Do you feel that the management values the work that you put in at school?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

---

7. Can you easily speak to someone in a management position that is able to help you with work problems? \_\_\_\_\_

8. Do you feel that you (as an individual teacher) benefit from the school's Specialist status? \_\_\_\_\_

How? \_\_\_\_\_

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9. Is there a sense of 'team' within your own faculty/department?

---

10. Do you feel that the workload is shared evenly within your department?

---

11. Do you have much say in decisions made within your department? \_\_\_\_\_

12. Are resources (equipment/rooms/time) shared equally within your department? \_\_\_\_\_

13. Is your department equipped as well as other departments? \_\_\_\_\_

14. Does your department have sufficient resources for you to teach effectively? \_\_\_\_\_

---

---



15. Do you discuss pupils or issues with staff in other departments? \_\_\_\_\_

---

How regularly? (Once/twice a week, occasionally, never) \_\_\_\_\_

16. Do other departments seem to have similar issues to yours? \_\_\_\_\_

17. Do you think that alterations need to be made to the curriculum in your subject area? \_\_\_\_\_

18. Is it within your power to ensure that all pupils experience some type of 'success' within your subject area? \_\_\_\_\_

19. Would you welcome some type of nationally recognised certification for your pupils who try hard but are unlikely to achieve good grades in their GCSE's? \_\_\_\_\_

20. In some lessons I've noticed quite a positive atmosphere of pupil interactions. The children seem very patient and encouraging with the less able. Is pupil- pupil behaviour generally the same in your lessons? \_\_\_\_\_

21. Do you consciously encourage your children to help and support one another? \_\_\_\_\_

22. Do you think that values such as hard work and respect for others are given enough precedence at Green Acre? \_\_\_\_\_

23. Do you think that these type of qualities get much chance to develop in the modern curriculum? \_\_\_\_\_

24. Would you welcome a greater emphasis in the curriculum towards developing character strengths alongside knowledge? \_\_\_\_\_

25. Do you feel that pupil behaviour is a problem at Green Acre? \_\_\_\_\_

26. If a pupil refuses to do what you've asked (e.g. to pick up litter that they've dropped) what course of action do you take? \_\_\_\_\_

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27. Have you any suggestions that might lead to improvement in pupil behaviour? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

28. Are you a form tutor? \_\_\_\_\_

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29. Do you feel that you get much chance to build a relationship with your pupils?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

30. On an average day, what percentage of your pupils would you say were wearing correct and appropriate school uniform? (*Please circle*)

50% or less    60%    70%    80%    90%    More than 90%

31. Would you usually question pupils who are not wearing correct school uniform? \_\_\_\_\_

32. Would you change any school uniform rules given the chance? If so in what way? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

33. Do you think that there are any other school rules that need changing?

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34. Do you think that Arrow Vale is a pleasant school to walk into? \_\_\_\_\_

Please give your reasons: \_\_\_\_\_

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35. Is it usually kept clean and tidy? \_\_\_\_\_

36. Does it usually have interesting displays?

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37. On a day to day basis do you think that parents are made to feel welcome at the school? \_\_\_\_\_  
How? \_\_\_\_\_

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38. Are you involved in the organisation of any extra-curricular activities? (If 'yes' then please name) \_\_\_\_\_

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Why did you chose to become/ not to become involved? \_\_\_\_\_

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38. Do you think that school 'league tables' are appropriate? \_\_\_\_\_

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

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39. Do you think that threshold assessment is appropriate? \_\_\_\_\_

Why?

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If there is any other pertinent information that relates to the culture of the school that you believe has been missed out from this questionnaire, then please write below:

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With many sincere thanks for your time in contributing to this research, *Carla Solvason*.

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## Appendix H: Governing Body questionnaire

Dear Sir / Madam,

15/04/02

As a member of the School's Governing Board I'm sure that you are aware of the research that is going on in your school. The primary objective at the moment is to assess the ethos of the school. Everyone's opinion is valid, not just pupils and staff, and I would be really interested in hearing your views. If you could just spend a few minutes filling in this questionnaire and then return it to me in the envelope provided it would be really helpful for my research. I will assume that you would prefer to remain anonymous, and so have not asked for you names. I will send a copy of the group's results to you as soon as they are all completed and returned.

With many thanks,  
Carla Solvason

1. Approximately how long have you been a school Governor? \_\_\_\_\_

2. Why did you decide to become involved in the running of the school?

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3. Do you feel that your opinion is valued? Yes / No

4. If you were involved with the school at that time, did you agree with the decision to become a SSC?

Yes / No

5. Do you think that it's a good idea now?

Yes / No

6. Why? \_\_\_\_\_

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7. We would hope that school would do all of these things, but could you please number the following in order of importance? Place 1 by the statement that you think is the most important and 6 by the statement that you think is least important.

\*School should enable children to gain qualifications-----

\*School should teach children to always try their best-----

\*School should teach children how to work as part of  
a 'team'-----

\*School should build children's confidence-----

\*School should teach children respect for others-----

\*School should teach children perseverance-----

8. Is there any thing else that you've particularly noticed or would like to add about the 'feel' of Green Acre Community High School? (E.g. are you always made to feel welcome there-how?) If so, then please write below.

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Thank you very much for taking the time to fill in this questionnaire. If you would like to enquire about anything, or tell me about anything then I can be contacted on 01905 855377 or [c.solvason@worc.ac.uk](mailto:c.solvason@worc.ac.uk)

## Appendix I: Teachers' suggestions for improving behaviour

- Better teacher- pupil relationships, taking time in lessons to talk about the pupils' interests. (They will then be more likely to respond positively to you and your subject content). Less confrontation, staff need to 'like' pupils.
- To be more organised. Better classroom management.
- All year heads working to the same regime, consistency in discipline across the school, everyone having same expectations.
- Smaller classes.
- Some type of intervention unit where pupils who are damaging the education of others can be detained.
- Reducing paperwork involved in referring someone on.
- Less emphasis on pace, a less rigorous timetable.
- Less staff absence/ changes.
- Unconditional positive reward. Praise and reward side needs developing. More celebration of good behaviour.
- Greater involvement of form tutors.
- Deal with the small issues so the large ones don't arise.
- Make sanctions policy more prevalent in school.
- More extra-curricular activities.
- A re-enforcement of respect for staff and other pupils at all times.
- Strong leadership direction and example from senior staff, with strong support.
- Leadership need to discuss the problems, get staff on board and show some powerful initiative.
- More emphasis on discipline and achievement (merit system not enough). Everyone to have high expectations and standards all of the time.
- Vertical form groups and house system.
- Greater emphasis on inclusion methods.
- Re-examine the use of the withdrawal system. More targeted use of intervention unit H9 to prevent possible exclusions.
- More contact with home, inviting parents into lessons. Encourage parental intervention.
- More interesting, relevant and exciting activities within school.
- Better explanation of rules.
- Less emphasis on things like uniform and more on what needs to be learned.

## **Appendix J: Governors' Response**

All of the respondents said that they felt that their opinions were valued.

When asked to make any other comments about the 'feel' of Green Acre, the respondents made the following observations:

- Head teacher welcoming and friendly- prepared to take time to debate issues
- Welcome at, and made to feel part of school at any time
- Teachers very committed
- A lot of change as result of new headship
- 'Family' feel at school
- Matters dealt with efficiently
- Children happy to attend
- Pleasant place to visit
- Pupils smart and well-mannered

These are all extremely positive comments, but even from their limited contact these individuals spotted problems caused by stress at the school.

Other comments made were:

- Staff overloaded with work resulting in stress
- Need for Governors and staff to meet together
- Staff have no time to relax together - breakdown of collegiality

## Appendix K: The effects of the Ofsted Inspection

I was very fortunate, and the staff very unfortunate that during my visits to the school they had an Ofsted inspection. Having endured two inspections as a teacher, it was fascinating to be able to observe the emotions involved in one from the detached role of observer. The most predictable and powerful result of the whole experience was increased stress, which began to mount from the day that the date of the inspection was announced. Just eight days after the date was announced (and still a full month before the actual inspection) the Head made reference to the “added pressure” (091002) on staff. As the visit drew near Mr Bennett assured the staff that he would protect their non-contact time by covering any staff absences with supply (091002). In some ways the planned visit was beneficial to me, as a number of staff saw my observing their lesson as a practice for the ‘real thing’.

Ofsted week was a performance and involved a great deal of preparation. When the Registered Inspector visited the school one month before the actual inspection, staff were given a brief note outlining what would be positive and negative behaviour during the day. They were told **“THE INSPECTION STARTS HERE. So does the Charm Offensive”**. Policies needed to be updated and curricula reviewed. A technology teacher apologised to me that I would be observing a theory lesson, because they had needed to do theory sessions for two weeks in order to ensure that they were doing practical activities when Ofsted came. Teachers needed to practice ‘good habits’ such as writing aims and objectives on the board at the beginning of a lesson. How enthusiastically such rituals were undertaken caused some contempt between staff. When I watched a humanities lesson the teacher announced, “I won’t put aims and



objectives on the board as *some* teachers have started-I will do that Ofsted week!" Pupils were also briefed concerning their role in the performance. As previously mentioned, the 6<sup>th</sup> form were 'taken into confidence' about the whole experience in order to ensure their support, and the group of children due to be interviewed by Ofsted were asked to see the Head as a 'matter of urgency'. For the first time the Head of PE even became interested in what I may have seen during my series of PE lesson observations, and asked whether there was anything that he 'should know'.

The arrival of Ofsted at the school began a polite war. I recorded that "The atmosphere was a mixture of excitement and anxiety, with many staff trying their utmost to make an initial good impression" (181102). Even visitors to the school were caught up in the 'performance' aspect of things, with a reverend that was visiting the school apologising to Mr Bennett that his assembly had not been observed by the inspectors. Where the staff had been anxious before the arrival of the visitors, this turned to contempt when their efforts began to be criticised.

I asked whether, with the new 'softer' Ofsted approach, they were not given an indication of when someone might be in their lesson. This set off a teacher on a barrage of how ridiculous it was that they had to write out all of those lesson plans when they could just do it for the ones when they were going to be there.

One member of staff had been observed and he was being interrogated about it. He had been told that the lesson had started very well but had fallen a bit flat in the middle. All of the other staff wanted to know how he had started his lesson so that they could copy it! He was told that he could have improved the way that the pupils were grouped in the second part of the lesson. Two notable responses were made by the other staff: 'You should have told him that if you hadn't had to spend all of your time writing out all of those bloody lesson plans that you could have put more thought into your lesson' and 'And then, perhaps, on the weekend you could go and swim the Channel'. (211102)

The effect on stress levels was clear through daily conversations about sleeping remedies and methods of coping. On the second day of the inspection one jovial teacher, who was very close to retirement, answered the staffroom

telephone with: “Hello, stress zone...no I’m sorry, he’s busy being stressed somewhere else at the moment” (191102). Many teachers were deeply upset and angry at the feedback that they had received from advisers. One maths teacher apologised to the PE staff that she had not made the Gym and Dance Display the night before. She said, “I usually go and I really enjoy it, but yesterday...I was so mad I just went straight to my friends and started knocking back wine” (211102). A usually extremely confident PE teacher felt so ashamed by the feedback that she’d been given by an inspector that she “just wanted to find a little hole and hide in it” (211102). And when a humanities teacher was advised not to take to heart the comments that he had received from an inspector, his answer was “No I won’t, the inspector can shove it up his bum!” (221102).

An inspection is such an intense experience for the staff involved, that it is easy to overlook any effect the visit might have on the children. It was interesting to gain insight into their view of events. The Head of PE was extremely depressed when, during one of his observed lessons the students behaved appallingly. Rather than being given credit for how he had handled the situation he was criticised. The boys’ behaviour had been uncharacteristically bad, and Mr Smith was eager to discover the reasons for this. Eventually he did:

He said that he had spoken to one of the pupils involved in the appalling lesson the day before and had asked him what the problem was, why wouldn’t he do the warm up? The boy had answered that they had already missed their break by having to line up for the fire alarm, they were cold, they hadn’t even had a chance to get a drink and all they wanted to do was play a game. When they had seen the inspector in the hall they had thought ‘oh great, here we go.’

(191102)

As teachers we rarely stop to consider the simple needs of the children in such circumstances. But even if we were to take these into consideration, events such as Ofsted do not allow for any flexibility, the needs of the pupils could not

have been met without it being an unsatisfactory lesson.

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